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THE NOVELS OF
OLIVER ONIONS



IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE EVIDENCE
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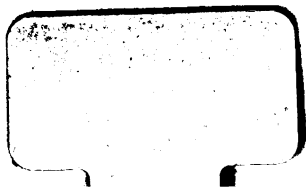
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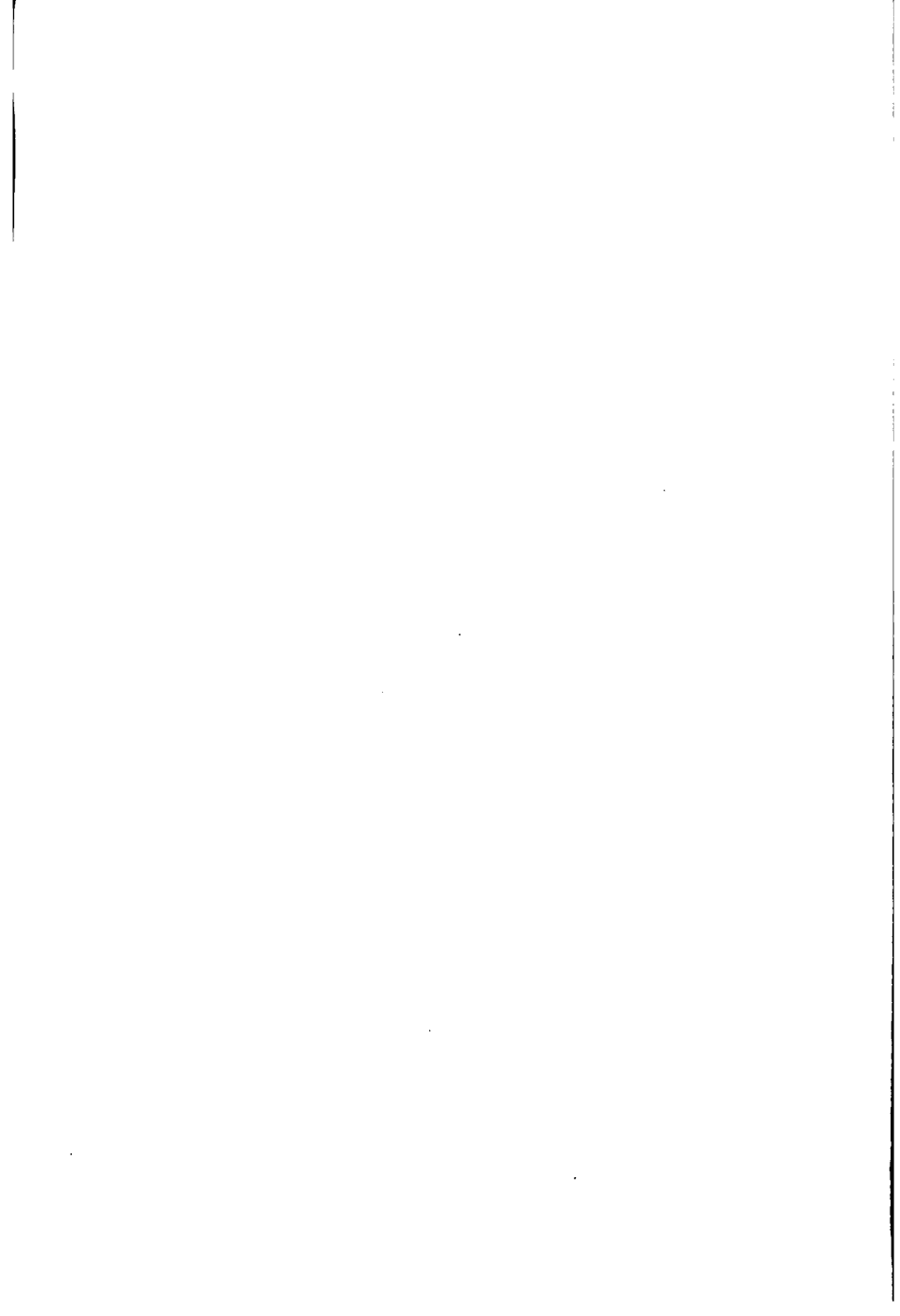


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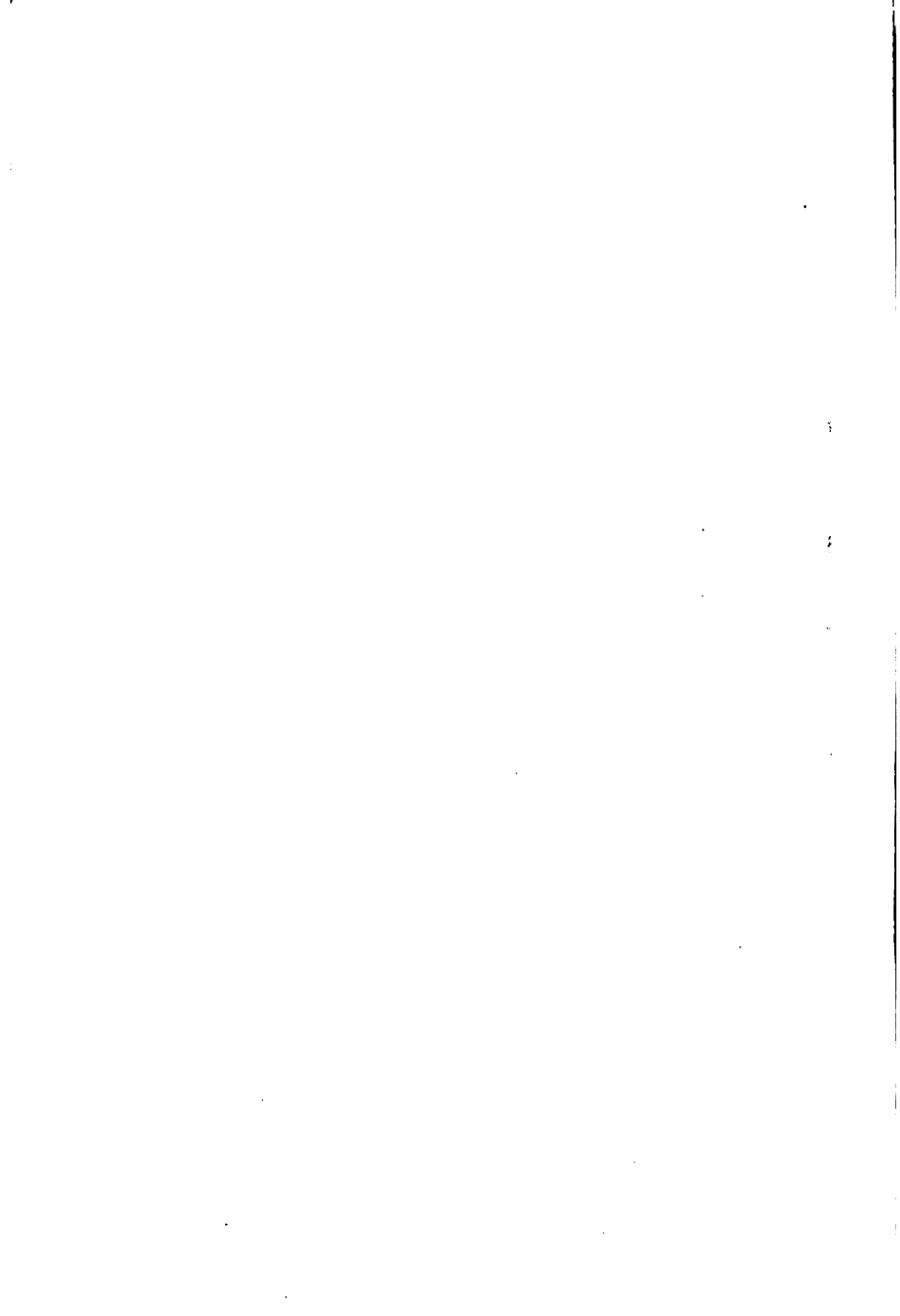


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**IN ACCORDANCE
WITH THE EVIDENCE**

OLIVER ONIONS



6
**IN ACCORDANCE
WITH THE EVIDENCE**

BY
OLIVER ONIONS
Author of "The Exception," etc.

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY
NEW YORK
Publishers in America for Hodder & Stoughton

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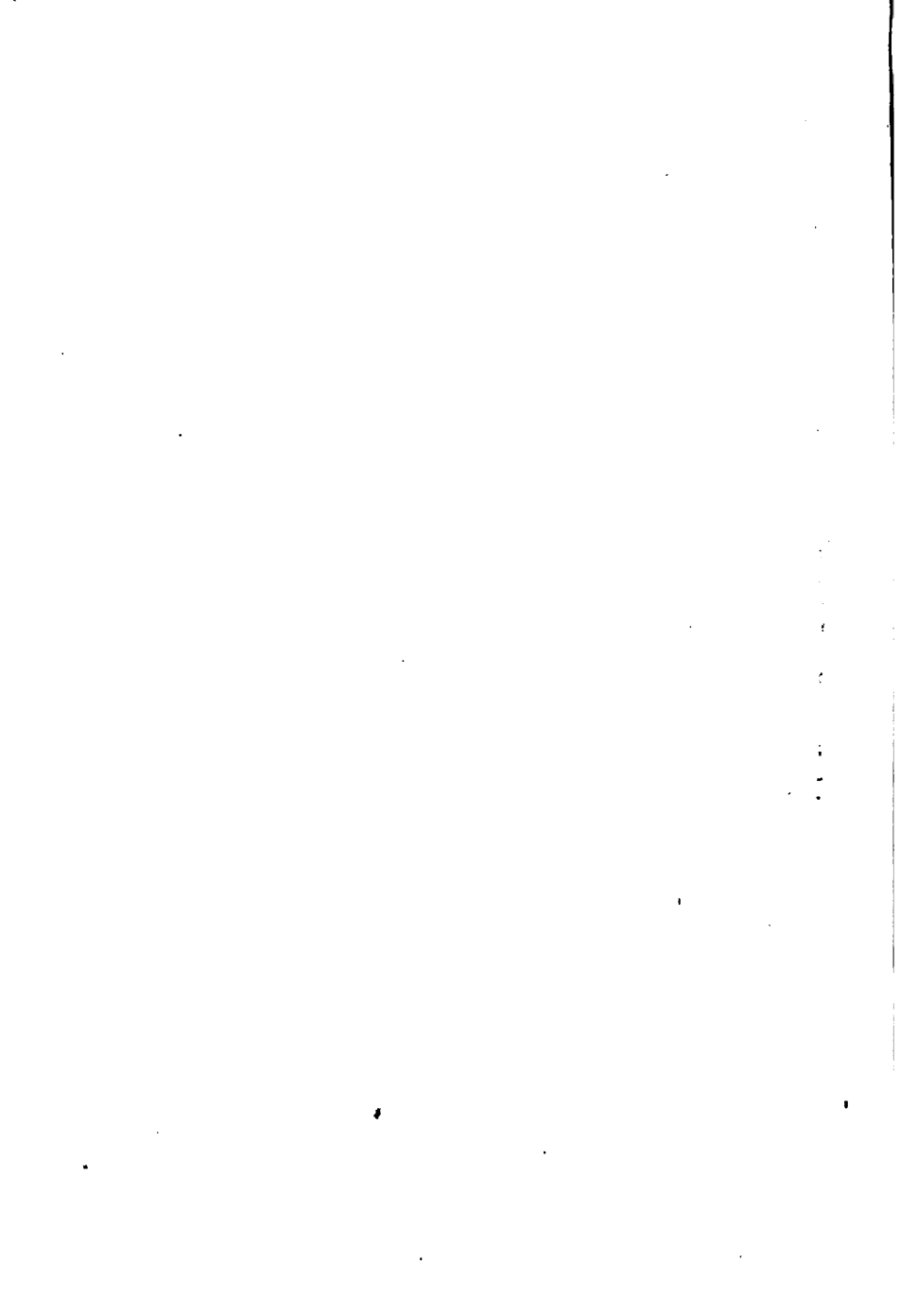
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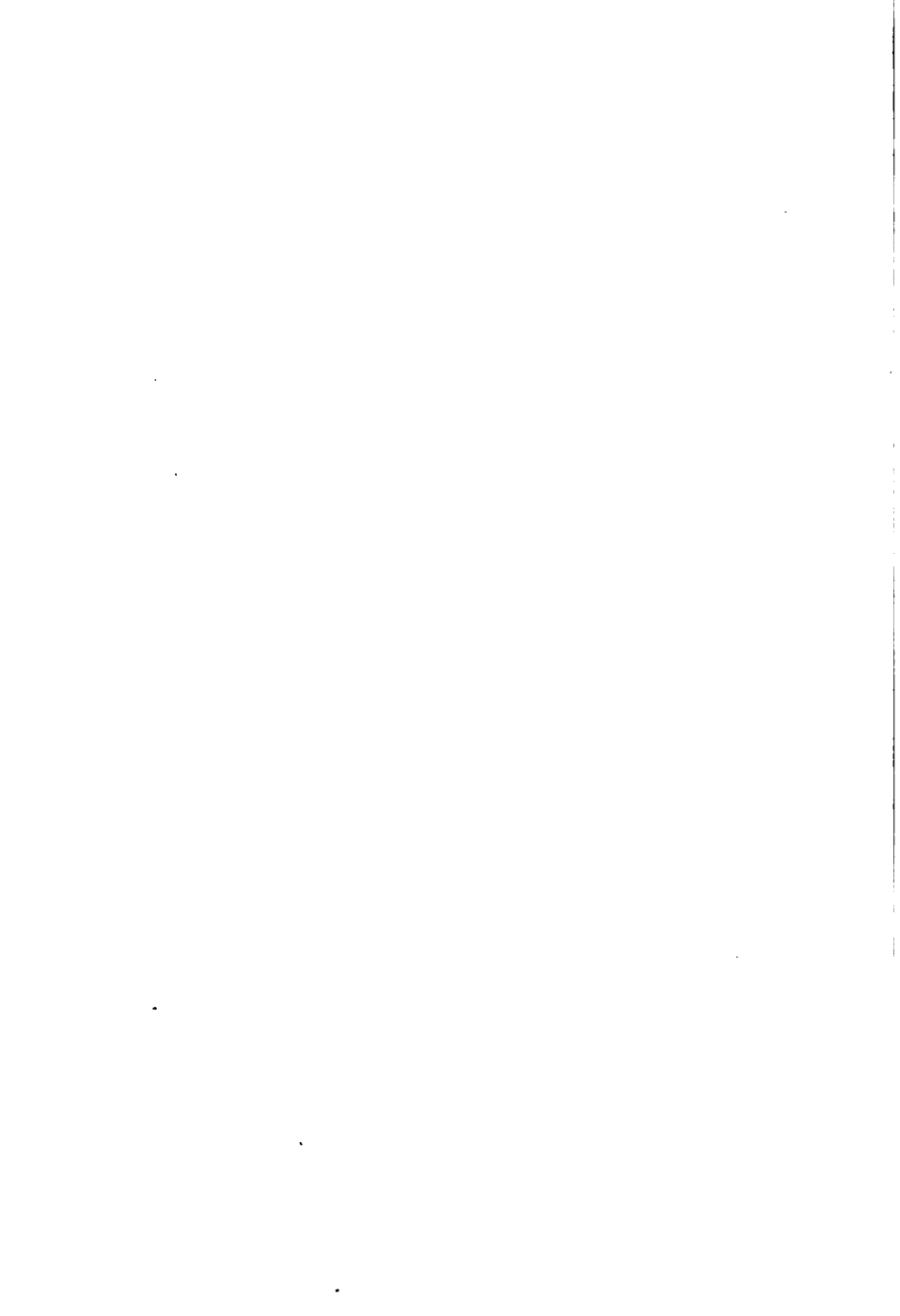
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TO
WILLIAM ARTHUR
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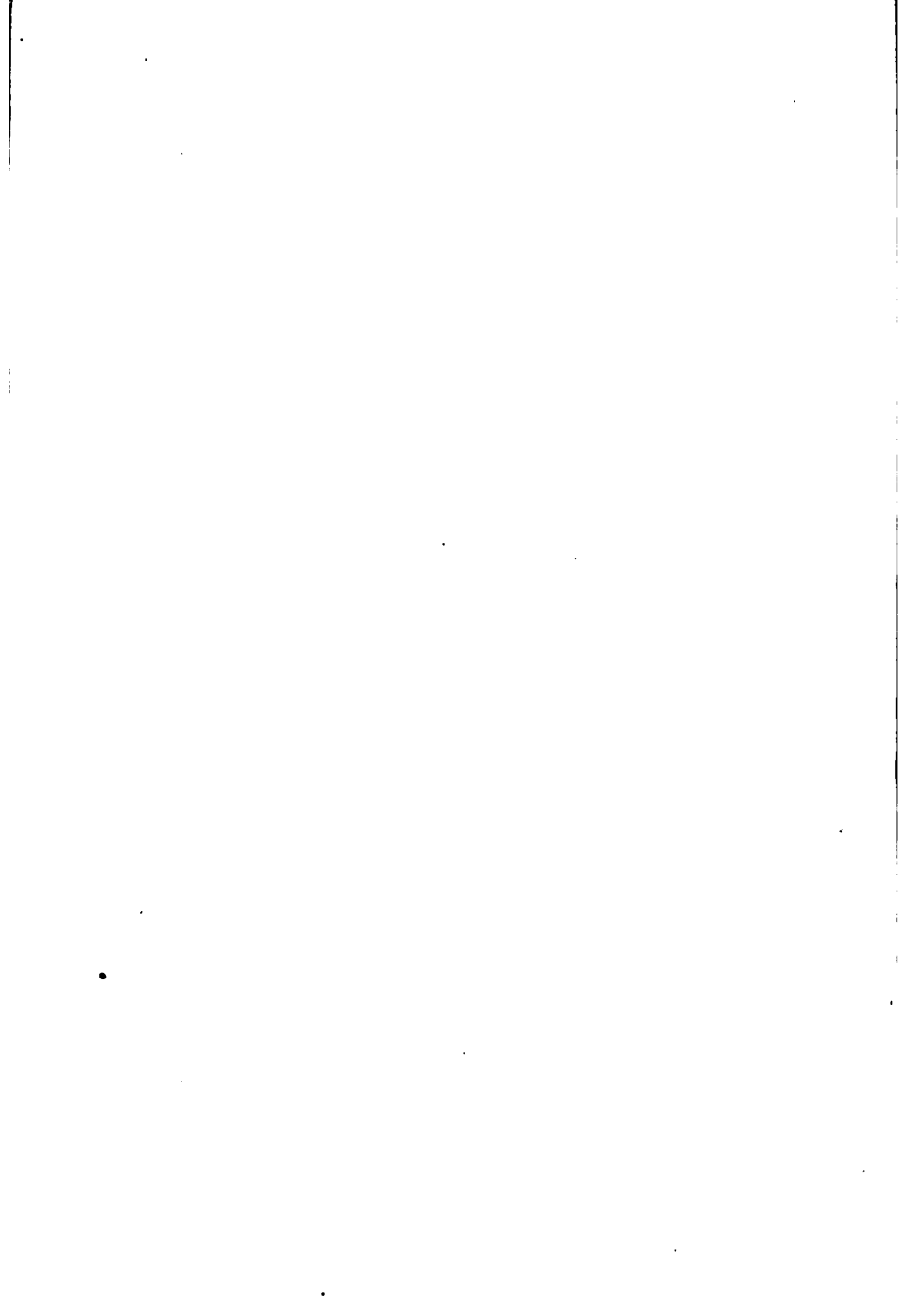


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PART I
HOLBORN



IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE EVIDENCE

I

IT seems strangely like old times to me to be making these jottings in Pitman's shorthand. I was surprised to find I remembered as much of it as I do, for I dropped it suddenly when Archie Merridew died, and Archie's clear, high-pitched voice was the last that ever dictated to me for speed, while I myself have not dictated since Archie took down his last message from my reading. That will be—say a dozen years or more ago next August. It may be a little more, or a little less. Nor, since I do not keep it as an anniversary, does the day of the month matter.

Either in my rooms or his, we had a good deal of this sort of practise together about that time, young Archie and I—reading aloud, taking down and transcribing. I am wrong in speaking of my "rooms" though; I had only one, a third-floor bedroom near the very noisiest corner of King's Cross. It was just opposite one of these running electric advertisements that changed from green to red and from red to green three times every minute; you

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know them; there are plenty of them now, but they were new then. The street was narrow; this horrible thing was at a rounded corner not more than five and twenty yards away; and even when my lamp was lighted it still tinged my ceiling and the upper part of the wall above my bed, red and green, red and green—for I had only a little muslin half-curtain and no blind, and if I wanted to read in bed I had either to turn my lamp out until I had undressed or else to undress in a corner by the window side of the room, because of being overlooked from across the way. I don't think there were any other lodgers in the house. It was a "pub," the "Coburg," but I could get on to the staircase without going through the bars on the ground floor, and always did so. The rather sour smell of these lower parts of my abode reached me up my three flights of stairs, but I had got used to that. It was the noise that was the worst (except, of course, that red and green fiend of an advertisement)—the noise that greeted me when I woke of a morning, awaited me when I came back from Rixon Tebb & Masters' at night, and often became maddening when, at half-past twelve, they clashed to the iron gates of the public-house and turned the toppers out into the street, to fraternise or quarrel for half-an-hour or more beneath my window.

But we worked more in Archie Merridew's rooms than in mine. "Rooms" is correct here. He had the whole top floor of a house near the Foundling Hospital, a pretty house with a fan-lighted ivy-green door, early Georgian, a brightly twinkling brass knocker and bellpulls, and a white-washed area inside the railings to make the basement lighter. His folks lived at Guildford; his father paid his rent for him, thirty-eight pounds a year; and his pleasant quarters under the roof had everything that mine hadn't—he could sit outside on the coped leads when the weather was hot, draw up cosily to a fireplace shaped something like a Queen Anne teapot when it was cold, and the ceiling, truncated along one side, didn't begin to turn red and green the moment the twilight came.

It gives me a shiver to think how atrociously poor I was in those days. More and more of that too comes back with the half-forgotten shorthand. I don't mean that I've ever forgotten that I used to be poor; it's the depth and degradation I mean and that—this will seem odd to you presently, as it seems suddenly odd to me as I write it—that memory is still more horrible to me than anything else I have ever known. My having got rich since doesn't wipe it out. If I were to become as rich as Rockefeller I should never forget the rages of envy, black and deep and bitter, that used some-

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times to take me when I thought of Archie Merridew's circumstances and my own.

I have got riches as I have got everything else—*everything*—I ever wanted, by attention to detail. You'll probably agree with me by-and-by that by "attention to detail" I mean rather more than most men do when they give this advice to young men about to start in life. I remember they used to give us, as it were, the empty form and shell of this maxim at the Business College, the place in Holborn Archie and I attended; but you've got to have been down into the pit and come back again before you realise the terrible force there is in these truisms. And no less in doing things than undoing them afterwards (when that has been necessary) have I planned to the very last *minutiæ*. If I have never seemed a particularly busy man, that has been because I have always disliked being seen in the act of doing a thing. And where I have passed my trail is obliterated.

Archie Merridew and I were only half contemporaries. He was younger than I by a good seven years—was, as a matter of fact, only twenty-three when he died. And in nearly everything else we were as sharply contrasted as we were in our fortunes. Indeed, we were much more so, for while I miserably coveted that thirty-eight pound upper floor of his near the Foundling Hospital, my faith

in myself and my ambition would have helped me over that. Physically, we were as different as we could be. My almost gigantic size made me, in my cramped red and green lighted apartment, an enormously overgrown squirrel in the smallest of cages; but to Archie's rather dandified little dapperness his series of roof chambers was spacious as a palace. Mentally we diverged even more. I was taciturn, he lively as one of the crickets that used to chirp behind his little Queen Anne teapot of a fireplace. And as for luck—well, if luck ever so much as nodded to me in those days, it seemed to change its mind and to pass by on the other side, while he seemed to pull things off the more easily the more recklessly he blundered.

And he had his people at Guildford, while I had never a soul in the world.

I don't know how we contrived to hit it off as well as, on the whole, we did. Perhaps that too was part of his lucky disposition—he could get along even with me. He always spread some sort of a weak charm about him, and this charm always disarmed me even, when to all intents and purposes he was merely rubbing in my horrible poverty. He would tell me, as if I wasn't already eating my heart out about it, that it was about time I made an effort—that *he* wasn't going to remain in those stuffy diggings of his all *his* days—and that if he

had only half my brains he'd be up somewhere pretty high in a very short time (as he probably would had he lived)—all this, you understand, for my good, the cigarette gummed to his prettily shaped upper lip wagging as he talked, and with the best intentions in the world. He was quite devoted to me; would tell me how he had told other people about those extraordinary brains of mine; and he never dreamed (though it was not long before I began to) that our respective ages were even then making of our companionship a hopeless thing. A lad of seventeen may attach himself for a time to a man whose years number twenty-four of bitterness and exclusion, but they will part company again before the one is twenty-three and the other thirty.

I was only an evening student at the Business College, while Archie spent his days there. Often enough he did not turn up in the evening at all; indeed, he only began to do so with unfailing regularity some time after Evie Soames had put her name down for the social evening course of lectures on Business Method. Evie Soames was a day student too, though only on three days in the week, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays; and the lectures on Method were given in the evening because they were specially addressed to those who, like myself, were employed during the day, and deemed to be ripe for the more advanced instruction. I don't

think Archie was very much wiser for Weston's (our lecturer) efforts, but he was genuinely grateful to me for my explanations of them afterwards, and would pat me on the shoulder affectionately, and tell me he couldn't understand why everybody else didn't see what a rare good sort I was. That was his backhanded idea of a compliment.

I think, in those early days of mine, I hated pretty well everything and everybody; and I cannot better show you how little I found to love than by giving you, before I go on with my tale, an account of my day at that period of my life—any day taken at random will do.

I had to be at Rixon Tebb & Masters' by nine, why, I don't know, since nobody else of any account whatever turned up much before half-past ten. But eight of us had to be there by nine o'clock, and I will tell you how our eight had been got together.

You know—or don't you know?—that there are firms that contract for the supply of "office labour" of all grades, from the messenger boy to the beginning of the confidential clerks; holusbolus, in the lump, as much of it or as little as you please. You pay, if you are an employer, a certain number of hundreds a year, and the agency does the rest. One down, t'other up; sack one man, and telephone for another. The agency's supply, at the maximum of a pound a week, is practically unlimited, and the

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firm escapes all personal responsibility in regard to its staff.

I was one of these consignments of labour—or rather an eighth of one. I don't know now what I did. I know that I addressed envelopes and checked columns of figures and lists of names, quite devoid of meaning to me, and got eighteen shillings a week for it. There was no chance that I should ever get more than eighteen shillings. Ask for nineteen and the telephone rang, the agency was informed of your request, and . . . well, three times I had seen that happen.

One chance of escape, indeed, we had; the firm was clever enough to allow us that. It was by way of what I may call the permanent junior clerkship. The permanent junior clerk was, as it were, breveted with the rank of the real clerks in the inner office; and so was hope dangled over the heads of eight of us. There was the junior clerkship amongst the eight of us. That or nothing.

I need hardly say that jealousy, espionage, and scheming besmirched our souls.

Well (to continue my account of my day), I addressed envelopes or read aloud from interminable lists until one o'clock, and then I lunched. This we were not allowed to do in the office, so that usually I ate from a paper bag in one of the quieter streets, or else had a scone and milk at an A.B.C.

shop round the corner in Cheapside. I was alone. My fellow-stuff from the agency, always on the look-out for a pretext of mistrust, found one in my (I admit) uncommon face. I put in the time until two, when I was not smothering up annoyance at those who would turn round to stare at a man who had been made half a head taller than the rest of the world, in wondering whether those about me were as rich or worse off than I, and whether they were able to procure a bath as cheaply and easily; and then I returned to Rixon Tebb & Masters' again. At six-thirty I proceeded home, washed, and went out to dinner. I dined at one of the establishments near the corner of Pentonville Road; you have seen them, there is an arrangement of gas-jets behind a steamy window, and, in galvanised iron trays, sausages and onions and saveloys fry. The proprietor of the "pull-up" fetched my dinner out of the window on the prongs of a toasting fork, and I ate it in a small matchboard compartment, or, when these *cabinets particuliers* happened to be all pre-occupied, at an oilcloth-covered table that ran down the middle of the shop. During and after my meal I read the whole of *The Echo* — I was allowed as a habitué to retain my seat longer than the casual diner. But on the nights on which I took a bath (did I say I sponged on Archie Merridew for this convenience, carrying my clean shirt in a paper that also served

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for the wrapping-up of the one I had removed?), I added to my obligation by supping with him also, and then we walked on to the Business College together. My clothes I bought in Lamb's Conduit Street, my boots in Red Lion Passage. I had always the greatest difficulty in getting a fit in either. At one time I had the misfortune to make myself very unpopular among the proprietors of a row of barrows not far from Southampton Row. This was over the purchase of a collar, and the cub under the naphtha lamp had made some joke or other about the uncommon size I required, saying that the horse collars were to be had in St Martin's Lane. The blow under the ear I gave him was heavier than I intended; I am afraid I broke his jaw, and I avoided the street for a long time.

After the class, I either continued my studies, as I have said, with young Merridew, or else took a walk. In this again I was always alone. I went far afield. If I went west, I usually turned along Great Russell and Guildford Streets, but the moths, English and foreign, of the half light of this last thoroughfare caused me at one time to take the way of Holborn and Gray's Inn Road. The nickname they gave me, they also gave, I don't doubt, to fifty men besides myself, but it seemed somehow to attach itself more conspicuously to me because of my general conspicuousness. It was that of the mys-

terious and ubiquitous author of a series of unelucidated crimes as to the nature of which I need not be specific.

Then, when I had walked my fill, I returned to my cage opposite the red and green electric advertisement.

This is a fair sample of my days at that time.

II

THERE is a showy boot shop now where the Business College used to be; the new place is in Kingsway. There, in Kingsway, I am told they have methods and appliances undreamed of in my time—mechanical calculators, wonderful filing systems, elaborate duplicators, and lectures on Commercial and Political Economy and Mercantile Law—but the old Holborn curriculum included shorthand, typewriting, book-keeping, and lectures on method and not very much besides. When I left, I remember, they were just beginning, as a high novelty, advertisement-writing. Later, I myself took this class, though only for a few weeks.

Even then, I think, the Holborn place was condemned to come down. A second-hand book shop occupied the ground floor; and above the book shop window three columns, each of three bow windows, one for each floor, formed the frontage. The three bow windows of the top floor were ours. Inside, the place was small and inconvenient in the extreme. It had been a dwelling-house once, and the old fixtures still remained—dark cauliflower wall-papers, heavy ornamental gas-brackets, and little

porcelain fittings by the fireplaces that still rang, in the second of the two rooms that had been knocked into one to form a lecture-room, a row of bells that resembled a series of interrogation marks.

Only four women attended the classes. The business woman was, comparatively speaking, a rarity then, nor can I quite make up my mind as to how much things have changed in this respect and how much they remain exactly as they were. They have certainly changed if it is all on account of her certificate that a young woman can now walk into an office and be promptly asked at what hour it will be convenient for her to begin her duties on the morrow; and, lacking certificates, three of our four students could hardly have fallen back on any natural diploma of personal charms. I mean, in a word, that Miss Windus, Miss Causton and Miss Levey were, to say the least, not remarkably pretty, though Miss Causton was beautiful as far as her figure and movements went.

But Evie Soames was very different. She was, in actual years, twenty; but she seemed still to stand among the debris of her teens as an opening tree stands over its sprinkling of delicate fallen sheaths in the spring. Both graces and awkwardnesses of an earlier time still clung, as it were, to her stem. She had, as I later learned, been at one school until she was seventeen, at a second school until she was

nineteen, and now, after a year of indetermination and arrested development at home, was still further delaying her maturity by beginning again not very differently from the way in which she had begun at fourteen. She had, of course, picked up a number of unimportant acquirements by the way, but had never, in those days when I first knew her, given it a thought that Evie Soames was a person Evie Soames might well have some natural curiosity about. She moved, neither woman nor schoolgirl, among the charts and files and dusty ledgers of the Business College, slender, dark, necked like a birch, and with eyes than which, when she looked suddenly round, the flash of a negro's teeth was not whiter.

I have told you how my days were passed, but not yet said anything about my dreams. As I cannot speak of Evie Soames apart from these I will do so as briefly as I can.

Whatever else in my life I may have been, I have not, even in my dreams, been a sensualist. It might in some respects have been better for me if I had. But so far was I from that that I have even been charged (though the charge is really as wide of the mark as it could well be) with a certain inhumanity; by which I mean, not cruelty, but—how shall I express it?—a certain inaccessibility to the ordinary human relation. And I do not believe the woman lives who, given her choice of these two in-

terpretations of the word, would not prefer the former. Only in the latter does she foresee her final defeat.

Therefore, when at midday in Cheapside, or in Guildford Street as I returned from my lonely rambles, or in Holborn or Oxford Street at the hour when shops and offices turned out their human contents, male and female, after the day's work, I watched the pattering feet on the pavements, I was not stirred as the fleshly stockbroker or conscienceless "blood" is stirred. (You must allow me this generalisation; you know what I mean.) My eyes did not meet other eyes as seeking acquaintance. I never, in train or tram or 'bus, set off my vacation of my seat for a woman against the bow or thanks I might receive. I never, even at my loneliest, held a waitress or attendant in talk for any satisfaction I had in her nearness. Whatever I have learned from crowds, crowds have had nothing of mine. Nor, my heavy and immobile appearance notwithstanding, was I (I affirm this) a solitary because I was refused acquaintanceship. I was a solitary because I refused it.

But what I refused in the streets by day, I could not sleep for seeking when I lay down at night. What I sought I did not and do not know; I was only conscious of a hunger within myself that, not being satisfiable by the eye-profferings and other

partial prettinesses of the crowd, were never offered that sustenance. I have heard this hunger described as a Divine Discontent, but that is to beg a question of some magnitude. It might be a very different thing from that. It might just conceivably be an Infernal Discontent. Or it might, in the case of a man who regarded neither God nor devil—But I wander. This, I say, was my dream, and I shared it with no sensualist.

Of course you have already guessed why I say all this . . . guessed what happened. Between the commonnesses under the street lamps which I spurned, and those dreams that were ever unseizably beyond my most ardent reaching forth, I fell in love with Evie Soames.

There are, I know, men in whom a grim and uncompromising aspect is so richly compensated for by other gifts that, like John Wilkes, they may fairly brag that with fifteen minutes' start they would outdistance in a woman's favours the most regular-featured buck in London. Therefore (if I may use a "therefore" without egregiousness) it troubled me little that Miss Windus, not to speak of her two companions, Miss Causton and Miss Levey, found me unattractive. In that coin I could have repaid her, had I wished, with interest. Since I did not wish, my attitude was one of fully-armed

reserve. All three of these women seemed to me to be for ever proclaiming, if not in words, yet in everything but words, that men, *as men*, have worldly opportunities given them by a sort of favouritism, and as a kind of present for their circumspection in getting themselves born men—as if in this world either men or women ever got anything they were not quick enough or strong enough or callous enough to seize for themselves. Miss Windus in especial, a sharp-featured woman of twenty-eight, with apertures like little scalene triangles out of which her eyes peered with an expression quizzical and weak and yet perky and self-confident at the same time (as if she was saying perpetually to herself, “We may as well hear what *this* one has to say for himself!”) struck me as being the final word in self-importance and inefficiency.

The top-heavy little Jewess, Miss Levey, was a very broker for gossip and tattle, and the remarks she occasionally made about others to me were quite enough to warn me that she would make equally free with myself to others. Both she and Miss Windus seemed to shout aloud the very sex-difference the existence of which they seemed at the same time to be denying. They “could not think of giving trouble” when one or other of the forty men placed a chair or adjusted a light or carried a Remington for them; but they would have known how

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to show their sense of the absence of such attentions all the same.

I do not know that Miss Causton pleased me very much more, but she at any rate moved with a wonderful physical harmonious grace and flow. If one might judge from her hands and wrists (a business certificate on which she ever bestowed the most sedulous care) she did not come from quite the same social level as the other two—was, perhaps, the daughter of a doctor who had married his house-keeper, or of a decent governess whose decency had not prevented her from running off with a groom; but I made no attempt to unravel either this riddle or any other that her rather contemptuous grey eyes might contain. The attitudes she took in reaching down a book from a shelf or passing her arm about the waist of one of the other girls when they assembled for gossip were all I wanted of her, and those began and remained a purely æsthetic satisfaction.

Therefore there could hardly have been a more complete contrast than there was between these apparently a-sexual yet in reality excessively sex-conscious women and my delicate unawakened Evie Soames. She made no more difficulty about giving me a "Good-evening," or "Good-night" than she did with the rest of the world; and though for a long time our speech stopped at that, it was yet as

much as I had with any other woman whomsoever. That I should get even thus much of what everybody else in the world seemed to get as a matter of course came so gently and softly over me that I did not dream of a worse misery that might lurk hidden within it, and in those early days of my love a mother would not have fought more wildly for her babe than I would have turned on any who had offered to come between me and even this sparse sweetness that had come for the first time into my life.

III

THE events I am now about to relate occurred during those early days, while I was still content to possess my dreams, as if as long as I closed my eyes the world would stand still about me.

One November night, as the series of lectures on Method was drawing to a close, I returned with Archie Merridew to his rooms, silent, but exceedingly happy. The cause of my happiness will not greatly excite you, it had been no more than Evie's "Good-night, Mr Jeffries," given me as I had waited on the stairs of the college for young Merridew, who had lingered behind to ask Weston something or other.

I had heard them coming down from the landing above, and, looking up, had seen the trail of Miss Causton's long grey coat and Miss Windus's blue and green plaid skirt and her gloved hand on the shaky old rail. I ought to say that the westernmost of the three pillars of bow windows I have mentioned as forming the Holborn frontage of the college was the one that lighted the various floors of the staircase, and if parties had ever been given in that old house before it had got quite so old, it

is odds that the embrasure in which I had just then been standing, that of the first floor, had held a few palms in pots and a couple of figures on its low window-seat many a time. But that night it had only held myself, waiting in the shadow shaped like a coffin-shoulder that the globeless gas of the landing cast.

I had heard Miss Windus's little smothered exclamation. "Oh! . . . That man!" but instantly she had gone on talking in a higher voice. Certainly she had had reasonable colour for the presence that she had not seen me—had I not happened to hear her exclamation.

And if I had heard it, so, of course, had Evie.

"Good-night, Mr Jeffries," Evie had said as she had passed me, and Miss Windus also, as if suddenly discovering me, had given me quite a bright "Good-night!" Miss Causton also had given me a languid, almost insolent smile.

I was happy. I should probably have taken myself and my happiness off somewhere had it not been that that evening I had made use of Archie's bath, and had left in his place, besides that paper parcel I have mentioned, a notebook of which I had need. So I had returned with Archie, and, not intending to stay, had yet sat down, overcoated as I was, before his fire.

"Better take your coat off for a bit," Archie said.

"I'd like a squint at your notes too, if you're not in a hurry."

The notes were part of our preparation for the examination in Method which was to be held shortly before Christmas. I threw apart, but still did not remove my coat, and Archie took up my notebook and read as he stood. Presently, feeling for a chair with his foot, he sat down, still reading the notes.

He looked up from time to time, but the questions he put barely interrupted my reverie. I stared at the fire in the pretty old-fashioned grate. He had no gas up there; his cardboard lamp-shade, green outside and a little heat-browned inside, stood on a chenille-clothed table; and he had given the shade a tilt for his convenience in reading. Thus the fireplace end of the room lay in a sort of irregular parabola of illumination. There were bright circles on the ceiling above the chimney of the lamp; then came spaces of cosy gloom; and below, in the pleasant light, were his arm-chairs, his small book-shelf, and, the rail of it catching the firelight, his high perforated brass fender. In the middle of a great cam of light that lay over the dimity-papered wall between his sitting and bed rooms, his dressing-gown, hanging from a hook in the bedroom door, made a grotesquely human-shaped shadow.

By-and-by, with the book on his knee and his eyes still fixed on it, Archie began mechanically to un-

lace his boots. I looked up as he reached for his slippers, and then resumed my reverie.

I was glad that Kitty Windus, whether she realised it or not, had been made the subject of an innocently awkward little snub. I couldn't stand the woman. I couldn't stand it that, ignoring my existence when she could, she spoke to me, when she did speak, with a false vivacity that only enhanced the effect of her passing over at other times. And lest you should think I was wasting my detestation on a rather insignificant object, I must ask you again to remember what my days were. The whole Scheme of Things seemed to be against me; but there is not much relief to be had from taking a blind fling at the Scheme of Things. A man with a grudge against the world will be very likely indeed to take that grudge out of the nearest person. I was not prosperous enough to have much time to waste on human charities. So, in my resentful hours, I took it mercilessly out of one against whom, in my calmer moments, I had no grudge except that she was not a thousand miles away. And if she had been a thousand miles away, I should have vented my bitterness on somebody else. I had to get rid of it somehow.

But if my thoughts gave Miss Windus more of this than she fairly deserved, perhaps Evie Soames got more in another sort than she deserved either.

There was not one of the few stray graces and sweetnesses I had ever known that did not accrete to and abide about the thought of her. No generous emotion, no human impulse I had ever experienced, but came with adoration and rich gifts with which to exalt her. In my heart I lighted tapers about her image. I did not ask myself whether she had supplanted my dreams, existed side by side with them, or was indeed my dreaming made truth. I did not wonder what she might have been in another man's dreaming, nor whether, apart from the dreaming of some man, she existed spiritually at all. I only knew that the fire inside Archie Merridew's fender was not warmer than that central warmth that seemed to steal (as if there also some bud-sheath had yielded) about my heart as I pictured again her sapling-straight figure, the flash of her turning eyes on the landing, and the tone in which she had bidden me good-night three quarters of an hour before. I leaned back as it were in some longed-for luxurious resting-place of the heart. I do not know the origin of the tears that gathered in my eyes.

Suddenly Archie threw the book on to the table and stretched himself. He gave a yawn and put his feet on the fender.

"Oh, I'm sick of work for to-day!" he said. "When are you going to start smoking?" he added as he drew out a cigarette-case.

I answered something or other—it didn't matter what, since my lovely moment had gone with the breaking in of his voice.

"Oh, well! . . ." he laughed, lighting up. Then, glancing at the blowing end before throwing his match into the fender, he said: "I say—what a jolly sort of girl that Miss Soames seems to be!"

As the cold of a spring night freezes the newly mounting sap of a tree, so I felt some sweet and vigorous change suddenly arrested in my heart.

"Wh-who?" I said. I had to make two attempts at it.

He laughed.

"Oh, of course—I forgot, girls don't interest you. Like your not smoking, I suppose. Hadn't noticed there were any girls at the college—only see textbooks and Remingtons. . . . Well, not to spring it on you too suddenly, there *are* four girls there, three of 'em rather sticks, but the fourth a ripper. What a rum chap you are!" he concluded with another laugh.

He had drawn his chair still closer to the fire, and now sat with his feet, not on the fender, but half-way up one of the pilasters that supported the chimney-piece. As he kicked off one slipper and began to warm one small foot on the iron-work just inside the pilaster, his profile was turned to me; but

I didn't at first risk stealing a look at it for fear of meeting his eyes. Stealthily, however, and moving my head as little as possible, I did so. It was a pretty profile—fair curly hair thick on the crown, his head rather high at the back and of a long shape to the chin, good nose, pleasantly curved mouth—the head of a decent enough but quite unremarkable youngster of twenty-two. He was neatly dressed in a grey stripe, and wore a black-bound red waistcoat with brass buttons. I say he was decent enough, and so he was: I knew he knew the taste of whiskey, but don't think he drank it very often. "Good wholesome beer," he used to say with an air of experience, "was more his mark"; but even then I think the experience was more that of his companions than his own. You wouldn't have said there was much harm in him, and he would probably have to spend his allowance unwisely once or twice before he learned to spend it wisely.

I made the moving of my chair an excuse for getting him better under observation.

"Oh yes, awfully jolly," he repeated, blowing a plume of smoke through which the firelight shone rustily. "Fun . . . no end of fun . . . rather! . . ."

Then he smiled, and the smile came and went and came again as he smoked.

I don't know why, up to that moment, I had never

thought of it—never thought of how it might already be or might presently become. I suppose the reason was that a man cannot hold the commerce I held with dreams without to some extent losing his touch of actuality. But now, at last, I was awake enough. . . . As if the room had turned colder I pulled my coat a little more closely about me.

It was not then that that heart of mine, which I have likened to a bud suddenly arrested in the moment of its unfolding, became more likenable to a grenade with its fuse waiting exposed for the spark that should bring destruction. . . .

But I was quite calm. For the matter of that, I am never anything else when it comes to the point. My angers have served their purpose when they have brought me to the point. I *use* anger. . . . Therefore, though I knew already that three careless words of his had opened an immeasurable abyss between us, I was able to speak to him without a tremor, from my chair at one side of his hearth to him in his own at the other.

“You mean Miss—— What’s her name?”

“Soames,” he informed me. “You know—that young girl—you must have seen her. . . . Yes, full of fun. . . . I laughed. . . . I did laugh!”

From the way in which he still laughed there must have been a specific occasion for his mirth. I

knew of none such. I wished to know, however, and I also wished to know what he meant by "fun." Young men mean so many things by "fun," and it— But I stifled something within my breast almost before it was born there. When I spoke, my voice was as steady as it has ever been in my life; but the devil, watching a soul that hesitates on the point of sin, does not watch more closely than I watched that fair boy with the cigarette dangling from his upper lip.

"Ah, yes, I've seen her. . . . *Pretty, too,*" I hinted.

But he put, if he heard, her prettiness aside. He chuckled again.

"I went last Sunday to the Zoo, you know," he said. "They were spending the week-end in town—my folks. And I saw her there. Or rather, I didn't see her at first, it was Mumsie who saw her. 'I think there's somebody you know,' she says to me, and I looked, and there she was, bowing to me. Then up came pater—he'd dropped behind somewhere—and blest if he didn't know her aunt—she lives with her aunt—they have rooms in Woburn Place. So we all went round together. . . . I started the fun by saying how like old Weston the secretary bird was; so we went round looking for likenesses—raked up everybody we knew—" He stopped, suddenly.

He wouldn't, had he been a year or two older, have pulled himself up quite so sharply. It is true he didn't go so far as to colour, stammer, or bite his lip; but his meaning, or his inadvertence, or whatever you like to call it, could hardly have been plainer had he done all these things. An anecdote was related to me not so very long ago by an agent I employ to advise me in my picture-buying. It was of the most sardonic of our caricaturists, and this merciless artist had (so the story ran) refused to caricature a certain person, giving as his reason that, while a vain or over-praised or too consciously handsome face was fair game for his ironic pencil, a face already heavily visited by nature went free. But for Archie Merridew's sudden embarrassed check I might have imagined that *my* own visage might have gone free also. It is, after all, not repellent. I bear quite a strong resemblance to at least one public man whose photographs appear in the illustrated papers—a distinguished scientist. My stature is the most striking thing about me, and if your humour takes that turn you can find remote suggestions of any number of people at the Zoo.

I made, however, no sign, and he, judging his clumsiness to have passed unnoticed, went on:

“Funny the pater knowing her aunt like that, wasn't it? Rather fun though. Mumsie said she must come down to Guildford for a few days and

stay with us; if she does I shall go home that week-end—you bet!"

My answer gave me no pain. It came, I think, out of just such an automatic reflex as causes an "opening" in conversation to call forth its own obvious reply. It would have been more marked not to say it than to say it, and as I am telling you, in my state of still tension it didn't hurt.

"Oh!" I said. "And when does one congratulate you?"

"What d'you mean?" he asked.

"Why, on your engagement."

Instantly I knew I had said the right thing. There was nothing either false or forced about the little exclamation he made, half scoff, half laugh. His face was clear as crystal. By "fun" he meant, simply, mere physiological laughter, the bubbling-up of the high spirits of his years. Human resemblances at the Zoo are quite enough to call up this purely functional giggling. She was "fun" (the odds were a thousand to one) as his sister might have been fun; with a certain freshness and sense of discovery perhaps, but otherwise not very differently. In spite of the sequel, I still think I am right in making this statement.

"Don't be an idiot!" he said. . . . "I say, Jeff, I couldn't quite make out that about indexing and cross-references to-night. Did he mean that the

cross-references are a sort of double entry for when the subjects overlap, or what?"

But there was still something I wished to verify.

"Who?" I asked. "The—secretary bird?"

This time I think he did colour faintly, but as he had swung his legs down from the fireplace and was reaching for my notebook again I could not be quite sure.

"Pass me the book," I said.

For the next quarter of an hour I gave him as collected and lucid an explanation of his difficulties as if I had had no other care in the world. Then I lifted myself up. I buttoned my coat, put the notebook into my pocket, and briefly recapitulated what I had told him.

"Thanks, awfully," he said gratefully, when I had finished. "You are a brick. *You* ought to give the lectures instead of old Weston. I'm sure if I pass this exam it will be all you. Must you go?"

"Must."

"Well—so long—I think I'll make a few notes myself before I forget again."

And, still master of myself, I left him arranging papers and feeling in his inkstand for a pen.

IV

I DO not know but what I might still have retained control of myself when I got out into the street again; I do not know, because I didn't try. Instead, no sooner had I got away from him than I went temporarily all to pieces. I remember I passed up Charlotte Street and turned into Mecklenburgh Square; and there I leaned against the railings of the garden that occupies the middle of the Square. I stood with my shoulder against them, looking stupidly down at my feet. There was a thin and melancholy mist; the lights of the boarding-houses and nursing-homes of the east side of the Square struggled through it with difficulty, and presently I found that my foot was playing absently with a few sodden plane-tree leaves that had drifted against the kerb.

Slowly, as I stood there, my stupidity gave place to a dull anger. I don't think it was anger against anybody in particular; it was as objectless as it was useless and exhausting. But if you have had that gall in your mouth that makes all the world taste bitter, you will understand my miserable rage. This changed presently to a shivering, weeping rage

The wide portalled door of a house opposite opened, and a servant-girl came down the shallow steps to post a letter; I daresay she supposed I was unwell or a drunkard; and a passer-by might have concluded that I had an assignation with her, or had just had a quarrel.

Then, when I had had a little ease of my anger, I pulled myself together and banished it again. Now that I had come, tardily enough, out of my fool's paradise of the past weeks, I had other things than purposeless anger to think of. I moved away from the railings; the maid, returning from the posting of her letter, quickened her steps to avoid me; and I walked slowly northeastward through the Square.

Quickly I became calmer still. Soon I was calm enough to recognise that I needed this. "What," I said ironically to myself, thunder-struck at a thing so very surprising! Did you think that because your head was in the clouds . . . come, come, you'd better look at the thing; you mayn't have any too much time, you know; if I were you I'd take a walk and think it out."

I turned into Grays Inn Road, and began to take my own advice.

While I had no reason to suppose that she had fallen in love with him, I knew almost for a certainty that he had not with her. He was not at

that stage yet. Already he was nibbling at other pleasures, and with a youngster of his kind one or two nibbles mean three or four. They may even mean ten or twelve. So far so good. I was still in time. I was, in fact, so far beforehand that, of the three of us, I was probably the only one who knew, not what had happened (which was nothing) but what might happen—which was everything. That I took for the starting-point of my consideration.

And I saw that that, at the outset, was an enormous advantage to me. Not only could I watch events, but I could watch them to infinitely better purpose than I knew what to look for. They, when it came—the “it” I had in my mind— (I ought rather to say did I suffer it to come) would not, in the bewildering wonder of it, know what had overtaken them; while I, by a timely use of care and skill, might even turn to advantage those disadvantages of mine which, huge as a church, might have been deemed to outweigh everything else. No more perfect cover for hidden motion could have been devised than I already possessed. Who suspects, of anything, one whom to suspect would on the face of it be absurd? I could, did I find this necessary, use practically the whole of my conspicuous life and narrow circumstances as a screen.

I reached the top of Gray's Inn Road, crossed to St Pancras Station, and, following the line of coal

merchants' offices on the left side of the road, plunged into the shadows of the Somers Town arches. It was there that I thought of another thing that I must interrupt my meditation to acquaint you with.

You may have wondered why, if all young Merriew said about my brains was true, I had still, after some years as an agency clerk at Rixon Tebb & Masters', not been able to get away from the place. Well, the answer to that is involved in a hundred other things that have ended, after fifteen years, in my now being able to write this chapter of my personal history at a great square mahogany and leather writing-table, with two softly-shaded electric standards upon it, and, containing it, a lofty panelled study, rich and quiet, with a carpet soft as thymy turf and my pictures and carvings and cabinets mirrored in floor-borders, brown and deep as the pools of my Irish trout stream. You do not want the whole of that long story. I will tell you as much as is necessary here. The rest I may tell at some other time.

The truth was that I *had* left Rixon Tebb & Masters'—had left the place, and had achieved the seeming miracle of being permitted to return. Such a marvel was without precedent, and I cannot say that it had been accomplished altogether by my own contrivance. I said a little while ago that there

were eight of us, had over in a lump from the agency; I also said that only by way of the junior clerkship was any advancement possible from that slavery of addressing envelopes that might have been for company circularisation or might have been sent over in shiploads to the Flushing and Middleburg book-makers for all we knew; and I had had the signal luck—I forgot this when I said that luck had always passed me by on the other side—to present myself for reappointment, without any hope whatever of getting it, at the very moment when Polwhele had succeeded to this post.

How Polwhele had chanced to be occupied as he had been occupied when I had presented myself I understand only too well. Sneaking, prying, slandering, peaching—you didn't become Rixon Tebb & Masters' junior clerk without having been through the mill of all this and more. Poor worm, he had got so used to it that he couldn't help it. Having attained to the junior clerkship, he was going to work up through the seniors by the same means, I suppose, and the means he had been making use of, at the moment of my coming upon him, had been the furtive rummaging of a waste-paper basket that had come—I knew this by the pattern of it—from Mr Masters' private office.

It had been, of course, the perfect opportunity for me, who was subdued to sneaking and peaching

also. I had leaned my elbow on the brass rail of a tall desk and stood looking down on him—such a long way down it seemed—he was on his knees.

“Hallo, Polwhele!” I had suddenly said. “Going to put Samson Evitt out of business?” And then I waited to see how he took it.

I don't suppose you've ever heard of Samson Evitt. He has been a solicitor; at that time he described himself as a waste-paper dealer; and what he really did, and for all I know does still, was to buy up, through a hundred miserable agents, and on the chance of coming upon some private letter or secret draft, the contents of such receptacles as Polwhele's fingers had been deep in at that moment.

“Going to start in Samson's line, are you, Polwhele?”

The colour of his face had changed as swiftly as that of the electric advertisement opposite my bedroom at King's Cross. He had gone as white as chalk. I had known perfectly well that he wasn't going to sell anything to Samson Evitt, but was merely playing his own hand with the firm; but he'd had no business at all with Mr Masters' waste-paper basket, and knew it. It had been rather horrible, but I had known I was as good as reinstated already.

“I'm coming back, Polwhele,” I had said.

He had not spoken—only looked at me with eyes full of terror.

"You're going to see that I come back, Polwhele," I had informed him.

"My God, Jeffries, you wouldn't have the heart."

"Oh no—not as long as I come back."

Then swiftly he had seen his years of shifts and meannesses all wasted unless . . .

"Oh my God! How can I do it?" he had groaned.

"I don't know, Polwhele."

I did not know, nor do I know now how he did it. Men do impossible things when they've got to. That had been on a Friday evening, at a quarter to seven (the zeal of a new junior clerk always kept him after the others had gone). I had given him Monday in which to see to it. On the Tuesday morning, at nine o'clock, I had been back at my envelope addressing again. These things have to be done sometimes. And I need hardly add that now Polwhele would have turned up at my funeral with a smile on his lips and a nosegay in his buttonhole.

Of the period between my leaving Rixon Tebb & Masters' and my return thither I will not speak. You may guess at the nature of its experiences from the fact that I was thankful to get back to my lists and addresses again.

It would have surprised my fellow-clerks, who saw in me one as listless as themselves, to learn with what unresting energy I had worked since then.

I had resolved that my next leap from that frying-pan should not be into the fire, and the means by which I was making sure of this was the Business College in Holborn. I knew my great natural gifts and the power that smouldered within me, but I had also learned, and in a school where the lessons were well driven home, that power and natural gifts were, for a man in my position, practically worthless unless they were supplemented and guaranteed. I had got to get myself certificated.

I don't know what certificates have come to mean nowadays, sometimes, I fear, very little. They seem to me to have lowered the standard with the utmost recklessness. I would not, in my own business, give a pound a dozen for some of these artificially achieved successes that are offered to me almost every day in the week, and it causes me no surprise whatever when I see the highly certificated also unemployed. . . . But it was rather different then. Once more I have forgotten my luck and railed at the goddess. It was my luck to be certificated while certificates still had a value, and for a year and a half I had drifted through my occupation by day but worked with an almost demoniac energy by night in order that I might not miss a single one of these tickets of authenticity that it was possible for me to obtain. A First Honours in Method would now complete my equipment.

And, looking back now, I wonder how much superstition there was in it that I wanted all the changes I was planning to come at once. For I meant that the break, when it did come, should be clean and final. As long as I remained with Rixon Tebb & Masters' my wretched single room at King's Cross was quite good enough for an agency clerk; when I left Rixon Tebb & Masters' I would leave those quarters also. Until then, I don't think you could have dragged me out, so strongly had I this feeling. Superstition or what you like, it had, for me, the force of a large and wise, if not yet fully worked out strategy. They tried, of course, at the Business College in Holborn, just as they are now trying at the new place in Kingsway, to teach us this larger generalship of waiting, withholding, massing, concentration, and then the swift development and advance; but I don't think it was much good. You don't get these things in return for so many guineas a year in fees. But I felt their stirrings then. . . . I hope I have made it plain that neither at the place in Kingsway, nor in my sordid lodgings over the public-house, nor under the arches of Somers Town that night, was I wasting my time.

And now, like a match to all that I had prepared and was preparing, had come the kindling thought of Evie Soames.

I remember I walked to Hampstead that night,

revolving it all. Walking always steadies me, and by the time I had reached the Lower Heath the mechanical calculators at the new place in Kingsway do not work more coldly and mathematically than my brain had begun to work. The advantages I possessed, which had been the first thing to rush into my head, I allowed for the present to take care of themselves; I now envisaged my disadvantages.

You may imagine that these were terrifying. . . . I counted them, and was unable to check my groans when, thinking I had come to the end of them, yet another sprang up, stabbing me as it were from behind. They might almost have been veritable assassins, springing out from behind the dark bushes and copses near the Vale of Health among which I wandered. . . . Think of them! Think of them!

They, he and she, were of an age, or nearly; I seven years the senior of the elder of them. They met on three days a week at the college, met doubtless to snigger together over their "fun," only on three evenings could I see her. Her people apparently knew his; she would go down to Guildford, and my fancy might picture them, together there, taking walks, telling stories over the fire, laughing at chance resemblances at the Zoo. And all this time I should not cease for a moment to labour at that garden of my ambition above the brown mould of

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which not a green shoot yet showed. How (you must remember I was desperately facing the worst that could happen and not the best)—how could they help but fall in love? What would it be possible for me to do but to discover the thing after it had happened? And when it had happened, what was there then to be done?

But I need not force all this upon you. You will see for yourself. Look at it, then, and tell me where you would have conceived the odds to lie—with my possibly large-planning but certainly slow-executing brain, or with them and their opportunities and luck and gifts of circumstance and nature, demolishable singly perhaps, but well-nigh invincible in the sum of them?

I weighed it as I strayed and stubbled about the benighted Heath.

I returned from Hampstead at three o'clock in the morning. My horror of red and green had long since been switched off, and I got into bed during the only quiet interval that noisy and populous corner ever knew. I had now balanced advantages and disadvantages together, and was recapitulating the whole. Examining, setting aside, bringing forward again to re-examine in other aspects, setting aside again, checking, dismissing, estimating—my brain worked like a ticking instrument. Clocks struck, but still I pondered; and I was as free from anger

now as if it had been another, not I, who had sought the support of the railings in Mecklenburgh Square.

And there dominated all my machination the single thought, that by no slip or carelessness or overlooked detail must they be made aware that I was watching them as a masked thief watches the uneasy sleeper upon the bed.

V

IT was at Rixon Tebb & Masters' that I first began to know jealousy, or at least the image of it. I find I must say a little more about this place in which I spent my days at that time.

I have said that Polwhele hated me; but nobody loved anybody else at Rixon Tebb & Masters'. I have worked in offices that have been not bad fun at all; offices where the fellows formed a sort of family, as they did afterwards at the Freight & Ballast Company, with something not unlike the family bond, the family jokes, and an interchange each morning of the adventures of the night before not unlike the exchange of items of news from letters about a family breakfast-table; but there was nothing like that at Rixon Tebb & Masters'. There, one of us could scarcely glance up over the little brass rail at his desk-head without seeing, across the spaces where the green porcelain cones of the incandescents hung, another furtive pair of eyes meeting his own and looking almost guiltily away again. If the partners despised us for our cringing before them they were right; we were a despicable set. I don't think a friendship was ever struck up in the place. We hated, if for no other reason, than because each

of us knew his neighbour to be as contemptible as he knew himself to be.

It was in this atmosphere that I wrapped myself about with the thought of Evie Soames. My routine work taxed my attention little; I could do it as well as it needed to be done and live a whole free inner life at the same time; and I was sometimes actually startled when, looking up after some lapse and interim in which I had seen nothing but the shape of Evie's birch-like neck and the brilliant motion of her eyes, I saw the crafty gaze of a fellow-clerk on my face. Once I met Sutt's eyes in this way; I knew his thought, namely, that he surmised the nature of mine; and he smiled, a mean sort of smile. He didn't smile twice, though, while I was there. I don't mean that I said or did anything, but I think he knew what my look meant. . . . All the same there got about the office—or rather about the corners and lavatories and behind screens, for it never came nearer to me than that—the only joke I remember ever to have been born there—the joke that Jeffries had all the appearance of a man in love. I took the hint. Thenceforward, as far as I might, I did not allow the faintest flicker of an emotion to cross my face. And more than ever was I on my guard lest I should do so in a place where it would have mattered more than it did at Rixon Tebb & Masters'.

Then, long before I knew of any valid grounds for them, and before a brain less prospectively active than mine would as much as dreamed of them, came these jealousies. Perhaps, like my occasional angers and like that secret fragrant flame of my love, they were emotions at large, unattached to any person but bound sooner or later to become so attached, and already seeking a quarter in which to alight.

They wrung my heart. Hot flushes and rages sometimes came upon me with no warning whatever. Sometimes in the middle of a column of figures or a twelve-inch-high stack of addresses, a devil would slyly lift its head—the thought that while I sat there polishing my trousers on a tall stool and the wrist of my sleeve on my desk, he and my Evie were—where? . . . I have in a remarkable degree that most precious and most hideous of gifts, the gift of mental visualisation, at these times it would have its way with me. I would see them in those moments where I would and engaged how I would. Well nigh as clearly as I see the page before me, I would see him, long boyish head and fair curly hair, red waistcoat and cigarette, and turned-up trousers and all, now making pretexts that something was wrong with her typewriter, now carrying a specimen ledger for her, now choosing for himself a place from which he could watch her, or even passing on to her the ex-

planations of knots and difficulties he had had the previous evening from myself. My fancy (my reason at these times its helpless slave) would dog them—past the general room into the lecture-room—thence to the back room where the charts and apparatus were kept—thence back again through the lecture room into the shorthand and typewriting and senior class rooms, and so throughout every corner behind our three Holborn bow windows. There were times when I used all my powers of concentration to see one of them without the other, and failed. . . . And then the fit would pass and my steady reason would reassert itself. I would tell myself I was a fool to thrust knives into myself thus. She was merely that touchingly opening fair young tree; and as for him, if his young male swaggerings in the pride of his twenty-two years included any knowledge of girls at all, they were probably girls of a very different class from hers.

Then would come the other damnable series again, and the sweat would stand on my brow.

No wonder Sutt looked.

Yet I am not sure that, for the sake of certain purely heavenly hours, I would not go through it all again. Would you suppose that in that five-shilling room of mine, where I had to flatten myself against the wall before I could take my clothes off

unseen—or as I dined on sausage and mashed at my reeking “pull-up”—or as I roamed the pavements in search of the physical exhaustion that should bring sleep—would you suppose that in these places and living this life I could have heavenly hours? Ah, but I could, and had! . . . I don't want you to think I am sentimentalising about it. The public-house downstairs had knocked a good many ideas about the sanctity of our common humanity out of my head. I never, in my fourpenny dining-place, looked at the drayman or porter at the next table and wondered whether he also knew the heights and abysses I knew. Doubtless he had or had had his own, but all is *not* comparative. There *are* grades in heaven and hell. I knew I stood out, exceptional, destined, marked for signal honour or for signal dishonour. I had no desire to persuade anybody else of this. These things are beyond proof. Attempt to prove them and you but prove their opposites.

And so literally was this slender dark creature “my life,” that often at the college itself my resolution all but failed me. More (but not much more) woman than child, she seemed at these times—what shall I say?—not a wonder shrunk, but a receptacle strangely slight and tender for the mighty things preparing for her. At such moments I found myself looking years ahead—seeing many things over and behind us, and myself, perhaps, turning my

power elsewhere. And that moved me more than all the rest. For my strength was ever being used for her. Service of her was the law of it, as I now knew it had been its origin. I sometimes had ado not to sob, when watching her young head bent over the page of a text-book, images of great and brooding protection of enfolding and strong and jealous wakefulness, filled my breast as I looked. I felt in those moments that for every hair of her head I could have killed a man and felt no compunction afterwards.

Evie caused me far more anxiety than Archie did. At all times Archie's vanities, quite as amusing to watch as those of any young girl, would blind him to much that lay an inch or two beyond the end of his nose. He was, moreover, deep in his examination work, and I had no doubt that, once the examinations were over, he would indulge himself in a mild little "burst" and flatter his seraphic self he was rather a devil in his way. But she was more difficult. For one thing, hers was a richer nature. She had, or would presently have, far more to give; and already I saw that, as surely as Miss Windus was one of Life's takers, Evie Soames was one of Life's givers.

I watched—how I watched!—for the slightest of her unconscious betrayals; and, of course, by dint of watching I was able to find a thousand that presently vanished again. I drew trifling tremendous conclu-

sions from the merest nothings. She could not make a gawky, captivating little movement but I would find something upon it, not a pretty coltish gesture but I had my inference to draw. The smile, perhaps, where lately the laugh would have been—the little check of recollection, even as she was perching herself with a tomboyish swing on the edge of a table, that she “was grown-up now”—slight little ceremoniousnesses, stilted little phrases and momentary forgettings again—I missed not one of these. My lovely, lovely flapper! Did you know that you were twenty different creatures in a week, each beyond words adorable until another swelling nodule yielded and allowed a peep of a yet inner fender and rosy heart?

Of course I see now that I was far too clever in all this. I had, in fact, taken the course that was least of all likely to tell me what I wanted to know. For, as a face seen daily shows no change and yet grows relentlessly older, so, because of my watching, she changed under my eyes and my eyes did not tell me she had changed. I have had in my time various things to say about “woman’s intuition.” I, like the rest of us, have set half of it down as guessing and the other half (the half that events falsify) as a convenient forgetfulness. Well, I hope I make amends when I admit now that in all this I owed my final enlightenment to a woman, and to the woman

to whom I would least of all have been indebted—to Miss Windus.

It was on a Friday evening that this enlightenment came to me. Fridays were ever a pain to me, because of the three whole days that must elapse—five if she failed to appear on the Monday evening—before I could see Evie again. Believe me, the last minutes of those Friday evenings always cost me dearly in emotion; and in order that I might make the most of them I had some time before discontinued a former habit of mine—that of working in the senior students' classroom. By so doing I had forestalled any remarks on the fact that I was frequently to be found in the same room as Evie. And even then I knew I was lucky to escape Miss Levey's Hebrew intensiveness.

But on that Friday night I was restless. An absurd trifle had unsettled me (but I have told you how much such trifles meant to me)—nothing more than an alteration in Evie's way of arranging her hair. Until then it had been drawn back and massed in a thick little clump on her nape, showing beautifully the small round of her head; but now she had parted it (I did not think altogether more becomingly) in the middle, and had evidently been making desperate attempts to "wave" it. Certainly the change gave her at once a more adult air, which I supposed I should get used to, unless, as was likely,

she changed it again in the following week. Her blouse also was new. It had a high lace collar up to her ears, and I didn't like it in the least. It was mere concealment, without concealment's charm.

I was restless. I had begun the evening by working, for once, in the senior classroom again; but presently, not happy where I was and not wishing to go straightway into the lecture-room where Evie sat, I had compromised by packing up my things and going into the room adjoining hers—the general room. The reference books were kept in the general room, and, presently, having need of one of these, I had crossed to the shelf and taken it down.

I ought to explain that these books were kept in three projecting bays, such as one sees in libraries, that stood out at right angles from the wall. Thus the books of each projecting wing faced both ways and between the bays there was just room enough for the short library ladder of three or four steps with the vertical staff to steady yourself by as you stood on it. As I could easily reach any book there without the ladder, I had passed the bay that contained it, and had taken up my place on the farther side of the wing nearest the window, where I stood with the open book in my hand. I forget what the book was.

As I stood I heard Miss Windus and Miss Causton come into the adjoining compartment.

I had no great interest in either of these women—I may say none, since I could not see Miss Causton's fluent hand; so, merely noting their arrival, I was continuing my reading when suddenly I heard the name of Evie Soames. It was Miss Windus who was speaking.

“ . . . Oh, I suppose so; in her way, of course—if that's all men want!” she was saying. “Don't you think?” This with a little acidulous rising inflection.

Then I heard Miss Causton's indolent voice in reply. From the way in which she spoke I fancied she was eating sweets. It had lately struck me that she ate more sweets than both the other girls together, and if it wasn't sweets it was something else.

“Don't ask *me*, my dear,” she drawled. “I don't know what the creatures want.”

“Of course not. They do seem to want such—odd—things. The way I'm looked at sometimes—I declare it makes me feel perfectly ashamed!” said Miss Windus. Why she said it I don't know. It was the purest hypocrisy, and it was not likely to impose on Miss Causton, who had a nonchalant, still humour of her own. . . . But on second thoughts I don't know. I was not always sure, afterwards, when I got to know Miss Windus better, that she didn't really labour under some such delusion as this.

"Do they?" Miss Causton asked lazily. "They don't worry me much. So long ago since I've seen one that I've nearly forgotten."

There was a short pause, then:

"Really, they stare so," Miss Windus continued, "look one so out of countenance—one really doesn't know which way to turn!"

"No?" came Miss Causton's ironical dawdle. "Oh . . . with a chance, my dear . . . I should!" . . . I suppose she smiled as she said it. While appearing to lay herself perfectly open she had far more to hide than Miss Windus had.

Miss Windus was shocked.

"You *dreadful* girl! . . . But really Louie, you must have noticed it. Why, you can see it the moment she comes into the room!"

"Really?" came the other detached voice. "How quaint! . . . Who do you think she's after? Not the Baboon? . . ."

I imagined the chuckle I didn't hear. I took it that the Baboon was myself.

"Mandrill, my dear," Miss Windus corrected. "You really must take a memory powder! . . ."

"Oh, I call it baboon," Miss Causton remarked with indifference. Then she laughed. . . . "How ridiculous you are! He's as big as a man ought to be anyway——"

"Oh, quite!"

"—and I declare you can look at him till he's quite good-looking!"

"Oh! . . ." (I could almost see Miss Windus' quizzical eyes.)

"Really, you are absurd! . . ."

There was another short silence.

"And by the way," Miss Windus next said, "*he's* been rather—different somehow—lately, don't you think?"

Sweets crunched for a moment, then:

"Different? . . . Do you mean *he's* been looking at you in that—ahem!—dreadful way?"

"What, *that* creature! . . ."

"Beg yours, dear——"

"I should think so! . . . But I fancied he'd been somehow—not quite the same——"

"Well, anything for a change, as the song says. Myself, if I found I couldn't get along without 'em, I should prefer——"

But a "Sssh!" interrupted Miss Causton. Somebody had come into the farther bay, and the rest for a time was whispering.

When next the conversation became audible its tenor did not seem to have changed.

"Scented soap in a little celluloid box, too!" Miss Windus admired.

"One must keep oneself clean," Miss Causton

threw off. "Have some of this, dear. I simply had to have some chocolate nougat to-night! . . ."

There was a rustling of tissue paper.

"Well, it's a sign, and so's her hair-waving and polishing her nails and that lace yoke," Miss Windus resumed.

"Oh yes, the pneumonia blouse——"

"*And* her heels—*and* a scent-sachet! . . ."

You see that I was quite deliberately listening. I am not putting on any airs about it. I might have been Polwhele. I wanted to know, so I listened. I did more than listen too. I watched. I knew that the shelves were only half full on the other side; only a screen of stout wire separated the books facing one way from those facing the other; and by pulling out a book or two on my side I should probably find a peephole. . . . Very softly I pulled three or four out, found my opening and looked. Miss Causton appeared to be standing with her back towards me; I couldn't see her; but I could see Miss Windus, sitting on the library ladder holding its short staff, with her plaid skirt pulled tightly about one carrot-shaped thigh.

They began to talk again.

"And another thing that makes me *quite* sure, dear! She's going to young Merridew's next week-end!"

"Oh! . . ."

"Don't be absurd. You know what I mean. To his parents', of course; they live in Guildford. . . . Not that *she* told me, oh no! Not her ladyship!"

"Who did, then?"

"Not her, though I gave her *every* chance! Six months ago she'd have told me like a shot, but we're getting so blessed artful these days! . . . He told me."

"Then it doesn't look as if it *was* the Baboon?"

"Oh, I daresay she'll leave you your Baboon if you want him."

"Thanks. I think I should know which way to turn in *that* case," Miss Causton replied evenly.

"Coming?"

And they left the bay together.

It was by this admirable piece of Rixon Tebb & Masters' work that I learned what, it appeared, I had been watching too closely to see.

VI

I HAD intended in any case to spend the remainder of that evening with Archie Merridew. Mingled with my restlessness there had been a tremulous sensitiveness that had culminated half-an-hour before in a fit of satanic pride. Lately (I had decided) it had come to be taken rather too much as a matter of course that our frequent adjournments after the evening class should be always to his quarters and never, or hardly ever, to mine. I had quite enough to bear without further gratuitous rubs of that kind, and I had resolved that I would make myself his host that evening though he had lived in a mansion and I in a sty.

But after what I had so altogether discredibly overheard now I had fifty other reasons for wishing him to come along with me. Almost every sentence that had been spoken on the other side of that bay of books had contained a reason. But I realised that before I could trust myself to face him I must swallow the anger that crowded thickly into my throat. There was nothing to gain and everything to lose by letting him see my rage. So I walked back into the empty senior classroom, there to remain until I should have got the worst of it over.

By half-past nine I had got myself in hand. I gathered my work together. Students were coming to the row of washbowls in the small compartment at the end of the senior classroom to wash their hands, and Evie gave me the smile that was to be my nourishment for three whole days as she passed with her towel and the cake of soap in the new celluloid box. Archie had been working all the evening in the typewriting-room; now was my chance, before he could make (supposing him to want to make) any appointment with her, to secure this myself, and I hurried for my hat and coat and sought him.

“Ready?” I said.

“Right-oh; just a minute,” he replied. “I told ’em to keep my fire in—I’m going to swot like blazes to-night.”

“Oh no—you’re coming along with me this time,” I laughed. “I shall be ashamed to show my face at your place much oftener . . . unless,” I added lest he should shake me off, “you love me merely for what I have——”

He laughed too. He was at the young and squab-like stage that takes a pride in scorning appearances, and even finds the heart more rather than less honest when the waistcoat over it is shabby. He accepted with quite a good grace, got his hat and coat, and we went out together, I giving Miss Windus an un-

impeachable "Good-night" as I passed her, hardly a yard from the spot where I had peeped on her less than an hour before.

The electrograph opposite my abode was an advertisement of "*Sarcey's Fluid*," some sort of a disinfectant; and as we approached it Archie looked up.

"Phew! . . . Needs it rather, to-night, doesn't it?" he laughed.

It did not seem to me to "need it" quite so badly that evening as it had on some other evenings—warm summer evenings, for example—I had known. December had come in rawly, and the chestnut stoves and baked-potato engine were out. The poorer streets have no pleasanter smell than that of baked potatoes, broken up, sprinkled with salt from the big tin caster, and closed together again like a South Sea face with a mealy smiling mouth, and I had slipped a couple of these into my pocket for supper. I suppose Archie meant the fried fish papers in the gutters and (as we entered by my side door) the acrid smell of the public-house; but it was part of my fiendish pride to rub those things in a little that evening, and I made light of them as we mounted the stairs.

"Oh, you're pampered, Master Archie," said I. "I had thought of asking you round to supper next Saturday evening—not to-morrow, a week to-morrow—but I think I shall save my hospitality."

You see what I was already angling for. Well, I caught my fish. Of course he couldn't take Evie down to his folks at Guildford without my knowing of it, but I wanted to see the fashion in which he would make his avowal. We had left the carpeted corner of the stairs that the great ornamental public-house lamp illuminated brightly and were standing on the bare landing outside my room. He answered without an instant's hesitation.

"Afraid you'll have to, Jeff—twice over," he replied. "I've got to go down home that week-end; beastly nuisance! I was going with some fellows over to Richmond—stag-party; but the mater writes that she's asked Miss Soames, so I suppose I shall have to be there to help out—confound it!"

I opened my door and let him into the red and green.

"Oh?" I remarked casually. "Nice change for you. You'll be all the fitter for the exams. Don't tell *me* about your stag-parties though. I know 'em; you'd take jolly good care not to pick the place with the plainest waitresses for tea, what? I know you! . . . But if I were you I'd go steady for a week or two, my boy, that Method paper'll be harder than you think, I warn you!"

"I'm watching it!" he replied cheerfully. "By Jove! Jeff, I'd forgotten what a noisy pitch this of yours is! What on earth makes you stay here?"

“Oh, I don’t know,” I replied carelessly, applying a match to the wick of my lamp and replacing the chimney. “As I say, you’re pampered. The place is all right. I don’t do much except sleep here. It’s a bit cold, though. I’d keep my coat on if I were you——”

“Wouldn’t be much sleep for me here,” he remarked, sitting on the edge of my bed. “I should want a good stiff drink before I slept much in this racket!”

As I placed the lamp globe on its brass ring I glanced covertly at him. It was a green interval, and his face looked as if he stood by a chemist’s window near the big pear-shaped green globe, while his waistcoat was turned to a black purple, with one brass button gleaming green as a cat’s eye. Then the red came again, and the lamp flame crept up. I went to the little cupboard where I kept my few cups and saucers and plates. I filled my kettle at the tap on the landing, put it on the half-crown oil-stove, and began to prepare our feast.

In a quarter of an hour it was ready—tea, the baked potatoes, and a wedge of butter apiece. We ate it, he sitting on my bed, I in my sagging and string-mended old wicker chair. I saw quite plainly that already he wanted to be off, and would stay no longer than the barest decency demanded; but he had got to eat that pauper’s meal before I let him

go, and there were my forty-nine other reasons for having got him up there.

One of these other reasons had, during the last hour, taken complete shape in my mind. Its consequences would have been impossible to foresee, but, as far as it yet went, I thought it crafty enough. I filched another look at him; he was burning the roof of his mouth with hot potato as he lolled against my bed foot; and I judged it time to put my plan into execution.

I pushed my own plate away and sank back into my lifeless old wicker chair. He had turned his coat collar up by this time. My plan kept me warm.

"You're a lucky beggar, you know, Archie," I sighed heavily.

He had moved, to set down his cup of untasted tea on the floor. He looked up.

"How?" he asked.

I settled myself farther back.

"How!" I repeated almost vindictively. "Don't you call it lucky having a house and people and so on?"

"Oh! Everybody has——" he began, but corrected himself. "I mean, I thought you meant some special luck!"

"Oh no—just that," I murmured. "Having a place to ask people down to when you want—that's all."

He seemed surprised. "Do you mean Miss Soames?" he said.

"Miss——?" I shook my head absently. "Oh no, I wasn't thinking of Miss Soames—I was thinking of something quite different."

He meditated for a moment.

"You *have* seemed a bit different lately. . . . What's up?" he demanded, looking squarely at me.

My plan, to which his last words gave a new and unexpected fillip, was briefly this:

When, over the case of reference books, I had heard Miss Windus make the very remark he also had just made—namely, that I had been "different"—I had had a swift access of alarm. In what particular I had betrayed myself I didn't know, but I realised very clearly, and doubly clearly now that the same remark had dropped from Archie himself, that love and a light cannot be hid, and that if my extreme former care had not secured me from remark no care I was likely to be able to take for the future would do so. I had laid myself open, and should do so again. How was I to cover myself?

I thought I saw my way. I invite you to consider that way.

Were I to give it out to Archie—or rather, not so much to give it out as allow a surmise to dawn on him—that my heart was already pre-engaged in

some carefully unspecified quarter or other, not only would this "difference," both he and Miss Windus had remarked on, be admitted and accounted for, but I should at one stroke set myself free from a hundred other trammels of gossip, past, present and to come. After that avowal nothing I did would be unaccountable. I should have a definite place in the general sex-understanding. I should be classed, out of the running, filed and docketed, totally uninteresting to either Miss Windus or Miss Causton and rid of the attentions of Miss Levey.

And I should also—my heart had thrilled suddenly and poignantly as I thought of this—I should also be admitted at once to privileges. I should have my share in such freedoms and exemptions as the married man knows fully and the attached bachelor at least to a probationary extent. This state of things does by tacit acknowledgment exist. The man who can say all to one woman can say more than other men to all women. And the shining immunity I now saw before me would even include what so far I had had to deny myself—conversation, thus safeguarded, with Evie herself.

"By heaven!" my heart now cried within me, "I will do it!"

And instantly a perfect seething of the cautions and reserves with which I must do it sprang up in my brain.

But here was Archie patiently waiting for me to speak.

“What’s up? What the dickens are you talking about?” he asked once more.

I let my head drop, as a man might who discovers he has said too much. “Oh, nothing,” I replied.

Archie was just as sharp as—neither more nor less than—I wished him to be.

“A lot of fuss about nothing—if it’s really nothing,” he said suspiciously.

The next moment he had looked hard into my face, taken a long breath, and, suddenly bringing his hand down on his thigh, broken into loud laughter.

“By Jove! Jeff—I really believe—let’s have a look at you—by Jove! I really do—I *believe you’re in love!* What a—— How ripping, I mean! Best congratulations, old chap—my turn this time—ha ha ha ha!”

I drew myself heavily up. The kind of thing I was doing has to be done rather carefully. “Look here, Archie—” I began, trembling between the wrath I felt and the not-too-much wrath I must appear to display; but he interrupted me:

“Well, that’s a knock-out! Who’d have dreamed——”

“Why not?” I demanded sharply.

“Oh, I didn’t mean that!” he made such haste to say that it was plain as a pikestaff that he had

meant precisely "that." "I only meant, how surprising—how unexpected. I mean——"

I frowned. "*Should* you find it so—if it *were* so?"

"Should!" he said, puzzled. ". . . Isn't it so, Jeff?"

"No," I replied; but a "No" that so exquisitely contradicted itself that I gave myself nothing less than admiration for the performance.

"No?" he echoed. "You're lying, Jeff—you *are!*" he broke out triumphantly. "I can tell by the way you say it! So *that's* it! Dashed if I didn't think there was something! . . . Who is she, Jeff?"

But that, as you may suppose, it was no part of my plan to tell.

Neither was it part of that plan to enjoin either secrecy or the other thing upon him. That, I thought grimly, might quite safely be left to take care of itself. "Mandrill, my dear; you really must take a memory powder! . . ." I seemed to hear Miss Windus' voice again over the bookshelves. Oh yes, if he would give currency to that Zoo nonsense he could be trusted not to keep the richer joke, of Jeffries in love, to himself!

For that he and not Evie had been responsible for this pleasantry at the expense of my appearance I had concluded by a much sounder process

of observation and reasoning than that my love-lorn state predisposed me entirely in her favour. My watching, a failure in other respects, had at least succeeded in this respect. And that I had found had not been without its barb for me. You may remember my former pathetic gratitude that, while others singled me out for marked treatment, she alone had not, in the trifling forms and observances that are the gracious outside of intercourse as distinct from its inner truth, differentiated me from the rest of the world. Well, I had made a guess at the reason for that. It was, in a word, her upbringing. The aunt with whom she lived in Woburn Place had taught her to "behave nicely," and so on. I could see that education. Such maxims as that one must not "judge by appearances," that "handsome is that handsome does," and, generally speaking, the unexceptional tradition that the "less fortunately circumstanced" have special claims on superior gentleness and pity, form almost the whole of it. I, it appeared, was one of these "less fortunately circumstanced" . . . Of course nobody was to blame. By-and-by the amiable aunt would probably go a little further, and teach her that it is not enough that these unimpeachable precepts should be merely observed, but that the thought behind them must be concealed as well. When you treat a poor devil just as if he was anybody else you must not

let it be seen that you do so from perception that he is not. . . . Anyway, there it was, and it rather took the shine out of that "good-night, Mr Jeffries" that had sent me off happy to Archie's rooms on the evening when I had been so startlingly shaken out of my fool's paradise.

Thus I was persuaded, and as it turned out quite rightly, that it had been young Merridew, and not she, who had allowed his tongue this licence both on Weston's physical characteristics and my own.

His cup of tea was still on the floor, and by this time was cold. He hadn't tasted it, and, his renewed congratulations on what he supposed to be my blissful state of mind over, was once more fidgeting to be off. But it was quite at my own pleasure whether I released him or not; I had the hateful advantage of my baked potatoes and my poverty; and though he was getting colder moment by moment, being less accustomed to the lack of a fire than I, I did not spare him.

"Yes," I remarked musingly by-and-by, as if I had been thinking over a former remark, "I'd take that Method paper quite seriously if I were you. Save up your little fling till that's over. Stag-parties and work don't go together, my son."

He had a little gleam of perspicacity. "What little fling?" he asked. "Who said I was going to have one?"

("Carefully, Jeffries," I cautioned myself.) 'Aloud I said cheerfully, "My mistake, Archie—I'm out of the running in these things—I'm rather a Puritan by necessity, you see. Perhaps I was taking it rather for granted——"

He chuckled. "A Puritan by necessity! A Puritan by Miss Whatever-her-name-is, more like! Do at least tell us if it's anybody we know, Jeff!"

But I ignored the latter part of his remark. "Well done, Archie," I applauded. "I'm glad you see that when a man's got one woman he's no need for all the others. Stick to that and you're all right."

And that clinched it. "Well, you've got the pull over me there," he said.

I made no reply.

You need not conclude, unless you wish, that I wanted to start him straight away to the devil. I couldn't have ensured his arrival at that destination if I had. But I was prepared to go half way with him if by so doing I could keep him from getting into paradise by the means I had reserved for myself. I was doing him no conspicuous harm. He would have to rub shoulders with the world before long—was already doing so; and I said no more to him—nay, I said far less—than he would have picked up for himself in almost any gathering of young men of his own age that he was likely to find himself among. . . . So presently, when after (how

shall I put it?)—after having tapped it home that there *was* the one woman and also the others, I returned to the examination in Method again, I was talking as easily as if, his betrayals to Miss Windus notwithstanding, we had been the best friends in the world.

“By the way, that’s another thing you’re lucky in, my boy,” I said. “The exam.’s in the daytime. I suppose that doesn’t convey anything to you.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, it means something to me. I shall have to get a day off.”

“Well?” he inquired.

“Well—it doesn’t by any means follow that I shall get it.”

He stared. “You don’t mean to say they’d be such skunks as not to let you off for a day!” he exclaimed.

I laughed. “Perhaps they won’t be such skunks,” I remarked.

“Oh!” he cried, outraged. “They *couldn’t!*”

He was as ignorant about Rixon Tebb & Masters as he was about everything else in life.

Presently, with a “Brrr!” and a shiver, he got off my bed.

“Well, I’m off,” he said. “I didn’t intend to come round, and I’m going back to swot.”

I heaved myself up from my chair. “Must you?”

Well, wait a moment—I'll come down with you——”

Before I turned down my lamp, filling the room with the red and green again, I noticed his untouched cup of tea on the floor. I made no remark on it, but as I preceded him down the narrow stairs I found myself suddenly filled with a curiosity as to whether I guessed rightly what was passing in his mind. I had made my shot, and was as interested to know whether it was a true one as if I had had a bet on it.

Where the great public-house lamp shone brightly through the landing window the stairs branched, one flight descending to the side door by which we had entered and the other leading to the back bar of the public-house. It was as we reached this bifurcation that I found I had guessed rightly.

“I say,” he said, “I'm beastly cold! Come this way and have a drink!”

I shook my head.

“Not here,” I said. “Not on my own premises, so to speak. If you don't mind my having something thin I'll come over the way with you.”

“Anywhere,” he said, with another shiver.

There was another public-house just beyond the *Sarcey's Fluid* advertisement. We crossed and entered it.

“Rum—hot!” he called familiarly, peering under the frame of pivoted glass panes and flipping

on the counter with a florin to attract the barmaid's attention. "Come along, Flossie—hurry up! . . . What's your poison, Jeff?"

He had his rum hot; but I drank nothing stronger than peppermint.

VII

HIS incredible gaucheries apart, I had no reason for hating him. One does not hate a youngster seven years one's junior merely because he is a mass of inexperience and self-sufficiency. Once again my hate was really a hatred of the whole dreary circumstances of my life, and, when I saw this concentrating stormily over young Merridew's head, I made attempt after attempt to divert it. I swear to you I made these attempts. I made them first of all to save him from a contest so unequal as one with my wrath must be; and if I made them later so that I myself should not be merely the slave of that wrath, I still made them. And all the time, as I say, so long as he did not stand in my way, it was a matter of indifference to me whether he took the upward path or that which led downhill to perdition.

Unfortunately I was in love, and no man in love can stand by the rules that he knows ought to govern his conduct. Those jealousies I have spoken of as torturing me at Rixon Tebb & Masters' shook me in spite of myself. When I felt their approach I took care to give young Merridew a wide berth; and I

confess that in sometimes letting these fits have their way with me I found an abominable ease. Away from him, my heart was filled with rage and revilings; but these very outbreaks enabled me at other times to meet him with a smile on my lips and a welcome in my eyes. Once I had got rid of the overplus of my rage I could almost have persuaded myself of my affection for him.

So I alternated, as the red and green of my apartment alternated; and perhaps the red seemed redder and the green greener by the mere force of the contrast. I continued to walk home frequently with him after the class, to share his supper frequently, and to be obliged to him for my necessary bath.

I very soon learned that in the matter of my reputed being in love he had done exactly what I had intended he should do—had whispered the news about the college. It required no further eavesdropping to tell me that; I felt it in the altered air. I saw the knowledge peering through the little scalene triangles of Miss Windus' eyes, saw it in the looks of sleepy and amused curiosity with which Miss Couston favoured me. The latter lady, indeed, sometimes positively alarmed me, for the glances I suffered when I chanced to enter a room in which she was at work held incalculable things, and I no longer dared to look at her own amused and supercilious eyes, her fascinating hands, or that foot beneath the hem of

her dress, fine and slender as a violin. And with the least encouragement Miss Windus would, I knew, have sought my company, and, lacking an admirer of her own, would have eased her breast to somebody else's of all the things about love at large that she ached to say to somebody. I wondered, seeing them both, whether there was no middle way with women. The whole sex seemed to be divided into creatures (or rather a creature, for I set Evie apart) to be enskied by men, and the other kind, that a man might fly as he would fly a wild animal. And I am not sure even now that when these two things are found in one and the same woman they ever really shake down together. They seem to go on existing, independently, unreconciled, side by side.

But Miss Levey was far worse. She always seemed to me to crave information, useful or useless, from a mere acquisitiveness; and I may say now that it was she who, later, first roused in me the uneasy suspicion that unless I was exceedingly careful I should find that I had undertaken more than I could well manage. She began all at once to show quite a liking for my company. She mislaid books in the room where I sat, got into difficulties with copying presses when I was about, and glanced up at open or closed windows too high for her reach, as if she felt a draught or the lack of air, it didn't matter which, and must suffer until somebody came

to her help. All this had its rise in the idlest curiosity, unless, as I sometimes suspected, she had made a bet that she would get out of me who this imaginary *fiancée* of mine was, and was determined to win it. One day as I saw her struggling with the blind cords in one of the window bays, and advanced to her assistance, she relinquished the cords, and then, as if to apologise for the trouble she was causing me, said, "Oh, thank you so much—you see I'm going to a dance to-night, and have a slight cold already. . . . You don't go to dances, do you, Mr Jeffries?" I answered that I did not, whereupon she said gaily, "Oh, you must learn! I'm sure you could find *somebody* who would teach you! Then you and your partner could join our set—such fun!"

And another time she actually came to me with tickets for one of her "hops," and pointed out to me that I should be saving a shilling by taking both a pink ticket as well as a blue one.

But while these were the results of my whispered false intelligence on Miss Windus and Miss Causton and Miss Levey, the results on Evie Soames were both foreseen and unforeseen. I had foreseen that it would give me a new liberty with her; but I had not foreseen that she, and not I, would be the first to take advantage of that liberty. It came to me entirely as a surprise that she should see no reason why, if my heart was engaged, she should

not speak of it as a matter of course to myself.

This, to my great confusion, she did.

It was in the small back room that we called the library, among the book-shelves and glass-cases of mimeographs and gelatine copiers and patent tills, that she did so. I had seen her talking to Weston in the empty lecture-room as I had passed through to restore a book to its place—a new translation of “Schmoller on the Mercantile System,” I remember it was—and she had turned as I had passed. I think she had been a little nervous about the pretty little exhibition she intended. It wouldn't surprise me in the least to learn that she had actually practised the words she was going to use, and I am quite sure she meant to go through it creditably. My lady was even then looking forward to the time when, on a small scale or a large one, she would have to do these things. So she followed me into the library, and, with one slender hand on the iron ball-arm of the copying press under the gas said her little piece.

“Oh, Mr Jeffries! . . . I hear I have to congratulate you!”

For a moment I did not take her meaning. Then it dawned on me, and I felt a quick constriction of my heart that was both bliss and pain.

“Oh? . . . On—on what?” I asked. I couldn't help stammering a little over it.

She wore a brown cloth tailor-made costume and

a thick knitted cap of white wool; and the shadow of this cap over her large eyes was not so deep but that I saw the almost reproachful look in them. It was almost as if she echoed: "‘On what?’ Can such a wonderful thing have happened to you and you ask ‘On what?’"

"On this we hear of your engagement," she replied, looking down at her toes. "It's—it's true, isn't it?"

For the second time I felt my facile invention sitting somewhat less easily on me. I stammered again, while she, I am quite sure, misattributed my embarrassment.

"Who told you that?"

At that she was sweetly arch.

"Oh, a little bird, Mr Jeffries! Don't tell me it isn't true—it would be almost—almost like bad luck——"

"Bad luck?" I repeated foolishly.

"I mean, like wearing your wedding dress before the day, or something like that—congratulating you too soon, I mean——"

By this time I had collected my thoughts. "It isn't true," I said.

Instantly her face fell adorably. In its expression I fancied I detected both indignation against her misinformant and mortification that her dear little attempt at social competence had failed.

"Oh! . . . I'm so sorry!" she murmured, all dejection and shame and rich colour. "Please forgive me!"

"It isn't true," I said, "that—that I am actually engaged to be married."

Like a flash she was all eagerness again. She had a book in her hand, not a college text-book but a novelette; and probably the whole of the novelette was in her glad change of tone. I was not exactly engaged to be married, but I *was* in love, and I daresay her brain was already a jumble of surmises about obstinate parents, secret wills, *marriages de convenance*, and true and severed young hearts.

"Oh!" she said again. "I'm so—I mean I hope I shall soon be able to—I mean I hope I'm not rude if I——" She floundered, already out of her depth.

"Not at all," I said gravely. "I only said I was not formally engaged. There are—other reasons for congratulation after all——"

"Oh, then I *do!*" she cried impulsively, with a grateful look that I had helped her out. "I'm so glad!"

Then, her ordeal over, she glanced towards the door.

But a daring impulse seized me. This was on a Friday night, and I knew that on the morrow she was going to Guildford.

"I see you're just leaving," I said. "Would it annoy you if I were to walk a little way with you?"

Again the code of her upbringing banished her momentary hesitation.

"Unless," I said, "you have already——"

"Oh no!" she said, with quick frankness. "I only meant that I nearly always go alone, or else with Miss Windus."

"I'm sure Miss Windus can spare you for once. One doesn't get congratulated like this every day," I pressed.

She laughed merrily. "Some of us don't get it at all," she said. "With pleasure, Mr Jeffries."

I slapped Schmoller back into his place on the shelf, and went off, drunk with bliss, to get my hat and coat.

That night I walked with Evie for the first time to Woburn Place. Never had the Bloomsbury streets seemed so short, never the east side of the British Museum so few paces in length. I remember very little of what we talked about, I know she spoke of her visit to Guildford. The invitation, she gave me to understand, was really to her aunt, and it was to the subject of her aunt that she quickly returned when I insinuated a mention of Archie's name. I insinuated it again a minute later, but after that, noticing the way in which she came back to the aunt again, I forbore.

“But I’m afraid we can’t ask the Merridews back, as we ought,” she said, once more socially prescient. “We only have rooms in Woburn Place, you see, and you can’t very well ask people all that way just to rooms, can you?”

“No,” I replied briefly. I was thinking of my own late hospitality to Archie.

“We used to have a house, of course, before uncle died, and you know how poky rooms seem after that.”

“Yes,” I replied, compressing my lips.

And so we chatted. I forget what our other subjects were. I left her, with our first hand-shake, at her door.

What that week-end was to me I will not attempt to tell you. I did not belong to this earth at all. The fact that actually, in her person, she was enjoying herself in Archie’s company at Guildford was nothing to me; the fact that every fibre of me was rapturously tremulous at the thought of her was everything. I triumphed as if I already had her yielding in my arms. Archie? . . . In my possession I laughed. I even felt kindly to Archie—felt towards him that it would give me pleasure to have him, by-and-by, a quite frequent visitor at my house—our house. . . . I spread the mantle of my exaltation over the draymen and porters of the place where I dined. Their heavens were not

mine, but if a man is full he is full, and I allowed them sanctities of their own. My heart was soft and generous to them. For the first time in my life I knew what folk mean when they say they love all the world.

The sweet influence had not quite left me when on Monday night I went to the college to see her again.

She did not appear that night. Neither did he.

It was Wednesday before I saw her again.

I do not know what damnable difference in me that absence of the pair of them for a single evening made. It came over me so suddenly that I was in its clutches before I was aware. It was a significant transformation. Let me relate it.

I knocked at the brass knocker of Archie's ivy-green door an hour before the class on the Tuesday night, and found that he intended to work at home that evening. (I only learned this, however, some minutes later.) I had had a double reason for calling on him at that hour, and the blood comes hot again in my cheeks as I recall my second reason. I had recently bought a new suit of clothes, not in Lamb's Conduit Street, but made, though cheaply enough, to measure; and though it was only the beginning of the week one of the payments for this suit had already depleted my pocket almost to the last penny. Since breakfast that day I had not

eaten. But I knew the hour at which Archie dined.

So nicely had I hit the moment for my self-invitation that I actually followed his hot dinner half-way up the stairs. It was only on the first landing that the servant stood aside with the tray to allow me to precede her. I knocked at his door and entered, leaving the door open for the dinner of which I intended to partake to follow.

He had brought a fowl back with him from Guildford, with one or two other motherly gifts, and I smelt the white sauce even before Jane put the tray down on a side table. Archie was in his brown dressing-gown, standing before his fire. He had taken the green shade from his lamp, and his low-ceilinged roof-chamber looked exceedingly ruddy and comfortable and home-like.

"Hallo! Good man!" he cried. "You're just in time—I was just funking carving—you'd better be getting your hand in for when you're a family man! . . . Bring another plate, Jane. . . . Well, how's things?"

It was then that the thing happened that still has power to bring the blood to my cheeks. It was exquisitely cruel in the moment of its coming.

"Oh, so-so," I replied carelessly. . . . "But I've just this minute swallowed my dinner, thanks. You go ahead. I'll watch you."

"Oh, rubbish!" he replied, in a tone that hard-

ened me. "I'll lay you haven't had so much but you can pick a bit of Surrey fowl."

I damned the thickness of his hide, but swallowed my choler.

"Really, thanks," I said, turning away to look at a print on the wall that I had seen a hundred times before.

Jane hesitated. It was a long way up from the kitchen, and the old bell-pull of red rope by his fire-place didn't always ring. "Shall I bring the other plate, Mr Merridew?" she asked.

"Yes—bring it—he'll change his mind!"

But in my hellish pride I had now no intention whatever of changing my mind. Twice again he pressed me, and twice I declined, the second time curtly; and he fell to himself, while I sat in a chair and watched him.

"Oh, by the way," he said suddenly, with his mouth full of food, "I'm going to work here to-night. . . . Sure you won't have some pudding?"

I rose. "Oh, well, if you're not coming I'll sheer off; why didn't you say so? Enjoy your weekend?"

"Oh, first rate. But, dash it all, don't be in such a hurry—you're far too early yet."

"Oh, I've just remembered something," I said, "See you again soon."

And I waved my hand and left.

I did not go to the class either that night. I was raging again, and trying to protect that young fool from the injury of my savage thoughts. I failed completely. Not even the thought that my passionate resentment was a force to be confined as it were in a boiler, and only to be allowed to escape by the way that would prove effective, restrained me from clenching my fists and gritting my teeth as I recalled the image of his pretty and ignorant and conceited face; and I am afraid I "let go" utterly. I walked by way of Chancery Lane and Bouverie Street to the Embankment; I crossed Blackfriars Bridge, and after that I don't quite know where I went, trying to forget my hunger, and trying to shake off my hideous grudge against the world that threatened to crash over the head of the egotistical whipper-snapper I had left.

I have related this at some length because it was the first time, but not the last, that that devil of sensitiveness took me in quite that way.

VIII

I HAD not exaggerated when I told Archie Merridew that I might find some difficulty in obtaining from Rixon Tebb & Masters' leave of absence for the day of the Method examination. That examination was fixed for a Friday, a fortnight and some days after my refusal to set fork into that fragrantly steaming Surrey fowl of Archie Merridew's, and this falling on a Friday added to my difficulties.

Or rather I should say that it added to Polwhele's difficulties, for it was to Polwhele I looked once more to find a way out for me. For Friday was a wage-day, and since I must have my eighteen shillings in order to live, a mere covering of my absence would not suffice. The cashier would have to be taken into the arrangement.

But Polwhele had by now to some extent got over his dread, if not over his hatred, of me. When I put the matter to him he refused. This was in the street, during the luncheon hour. The louse refused to help me, and turned away.

Exactly fifteen minutes later I had bearded the

cashier himself, catching him at the door as he was returning from his meal.

At first he looked at me as much as to say, "Did I speak to *you*?" Then, finding it impossible to pretend he didn't know who I was, he said, "What is it?"

I told him what I wanted, concealing only my reason for wanting it; and, after his first astonishment that I had taken the absolutely unprecedented course of addressing a request otherwise than through the usual channel, I found him not unmanageable. As a matter of fact, things were slack, and there was only one kind of labour that Rixon Tebb & Masters' would have preferred to that it had from the agency at eighteen shillings a week—namely, a "floating margin" waiting on the pavement to be taken on for an hour or two as it might be required. Gayns saw a chance of saving a day.

"You don't expect to be paid for that day, do you?" he said.

"No," I replied.

He thought for a moment. "All right," he said. "You can come for your fifteen shillings on Thursday night."

And Polwhele set another mark against me, that I had approached a superior over his head.

As I entered the Business College at half-past ten on the morning of the examination it suddenly

struck me that I had never been inside the place in the daytime before. By gaslight it was, as I have said, dingy enough, but by daylight it was shabby in the extreme. I walked round the rooms, noticing for the first time that the shorthand and typewriting rooms, which looked on the side street to the east of the block, were by far the lightest rooms on our top floor, and that the library in which I had received Evie's congratulations was little more than a thick twilight, which the cleaning of the single grimy back window that looked out over yards and chimney-pots would probably not greatly have improved. The room adjoining that, the old ledger-room, was not, except for the small high square of glass that gave on the head of the stairs, lighted at all.

They had made, too, quite extensive arrangements for the occasion itself. We had been warned that we should not be allowed to leave the premises until the examination was over, and as far as possible separate spaces had been provided for each of the twenty-five candidates—compartments of screens hired for the day from some furnisher or shop-fitter, and open at the ends to the gaze of the half-dozen perambulating guardians of the probity of examinations who looked as if they too had been had in for the day on the same terms as the screens. The contrast between the new fittings and the old wall-

papers and chandeliers struck me. And I remembered that even now, when I had been debited my three shillings to be present, I did not see the place in its normal daytime aspect at all.

The papers were to be distributed at eleven, and at a few minutes before that hour we were all assembled. A man called Mackie and myself were the only two candidates for the Honours paper, and he and I were kept well apart—I told off to a seat in the middle of the lecture-room, he isolated in the typewriting-room. Evie, timorous about her Elementary, was separated from Archie Merridew (who occupied the box between Miss Windus and a pale student, Richardson) by the whole length of the general room. We took our places; in all the rooms at once voices were heard reading some cautionary form or other (my policeman gave me the most mistrustful of glances as he pronounced the words "expelled from the examination-room and your paper cancelled"); the papers were distributed on the stroke of eleven, and the examination began.

I need not trouble you with what it was all about. The importance of that day to me was quite unconnected with the paper on Method. I ought, however, to say that the paper was in reality two papers, the first in Theory and the second in Practice, with the interval for lunch dividing the two. I mention this only to explain how it was we came to be

all talking together when, a little after half-past one, our first papers had been collected and we were free to unsnap our satchels or untie our parcels of lunch.

Despite my reduced income that week I had provided myself with a sumptuous lunch—two kinds of sausage from a *delicatessen* shop in Shaftesbury Avenue, a paper of potato salad, a roll, butter, some sort of chocolate *baba* or, *moka*, and a bottle of Schweppes' dry ginger ale. That lunch had cost me nearly three shillings—but I intended to eat only a third of it. The rest was to be my chief sustenance during the two following days. I was not among my porters and drivers now—oh no! I was cutting quite a dash. Archie, passing with Miss Windus as I opened my black satchel, did not forbear to remark, “By Jove! doesn't Jeffries do himself well, what?” and it had been in order that I might be assumed to “do” myself equally well every day of my life that I had made my little display. I ate my exact third in the same compartment I had written my examination paper in, and then, closing my bag on the precious remainder, put it under the seat and mingled with the others.

By a sort of natural selection, I presently found myself in the middle bow window, discussing the questions he had just answered with my only fellow-candidate in Honours, Mackie. Mackie, both at the college and elsewhere, was one of these blatantly

popular chaps, and I myself didn't like him. In some respects he was rather of Archie's kind, but he was older, more knowing, and had gone further. He was a singer of comic songs at "smokers," and a frequent looker-in at the shilling dances at the Holburn Town Hall after class. He was jubilant over the ease of the Theory paper, and was already so confident of his pass that he was cracking jokes right and left, as if a weight had been taken off his mind.

"It's going to be like money from home if it's no harder than that!" he exulted (almost prophetically, if what I said about the standard of modern examinations is true). "Kitty Windus says she'll eat her mackintosh, with the accent on the 'tosh,' if she isn't all right for the Advanced, and the Elementaries are as safe as your hand in your pocket! What ho! Come out on the stairs and have a Flor de Cabbagos."

I didn't want the Flor de Cabbagos, but I went out on the top landing with him. One or two others were smoking on the floor below, which was as far as we were allowed to stray. A few steps down Miss Windus and Miss Causton were sitting on the stairs, as if they were sitting out a dance, and Miss Causton moved lower down still as the fragrance of Mackie's "Flor" reached her, and then a little way back again as she caught the whiff that came

up the well. Mackie was talking of the paper again.

"All that mugging for a job you could do on your head!" he said, with regret for the time he had lost. "I wouldn't have dropped out of the billiard handicap if I'd known! Play billiards, Jeffries? I'm a regular John Roberts—in my dreams. Give you fifty in a hundred at the Napier when teacher says we can go."

And he ran on, with dull facetiousness.

But suddenly he stopped his rapid flow. He made a slight movement with his finger, and stood listening. I heard nothing except the voices lower down the stairs and the general hum in the room we had just left. But Mackie did.

"Hear that?" he said.

"What?" I asked.

"Sssh!"

I told you how the wooden partition at the head of the stairs, that with the small window high up, separated the landing on which we stood from the old ledger-room. The window was worked with cords on a horizontal pivot, and was swung partly open. Whether Mackie heard whatever he did hear through this window or through the boards themselves I do not know, but a smile came over his face.

"It's that young devil," he whispered.

"Who?"

"Why, young Merridew. He's in there with somebody. . . ."

I invite you to notice that I was improving. I was not eavesdropping this time—I was merely letting Mackie do my eavesdropping for me. He glanced round to see whether the women below were watching, and then set his ear against the partition.

"Yes, it's Merridew," he chuckled. "Nice father's hope and mother's joy *that* young man's getting! I don't suppose he's gone in there to talk to the secretary bird! . . ."

I found myself suddenly reminded of what I had noticed for the first time only an hour or two before—that the room beyond the partition was practically unlighted.

Then Mackie dropped again into the "bright" style affected by the singers of comic songs at smoking concerts.

"Ahem—good-hevening, ladies and gen'lmen! How am I? Very well, thank me! Ahem! I will now, with your kind permission, endeavour to entertain you with a few of my well-known impersonations on a subject that will appeal to all of you, no matter what your age, sex, condition, vaccination marks or the number of your dog licence—*London's Lovers.*"

"Oh, Mr Mackie's going to recite for us!" I

heard Miss Windus' cry of juvenile delight from down the stairs. "Please be quick, Mr Mackie—we shall have to go in in ten minutes!"

And those below pressed up the stairs to hear Mackie.

But I did not stay to hear the "impersonation." I walked back into the general room, and, with a violently throbbing heart, sought the seat where I had written my examination paper.

Do you realise what I had just seen? Do you see what had set my heart so thumping? If Mackie was right, and he had really got the cue for his "impersonation" from something that was going on in the ledger-room, young Merridew and Evie were alone in there together.

All that I had hitherto known of apprehension and despair and jealousy of Archie's luck and chances and juniority was eclipsed by the emotion that now flowed over me like a wave. The revelation swept me entirely off my balance. It seemed to me that once more I awoke as if out of a dream. I seemed to be standing as it were a little way off from my own baseless hopes and illusions of the past weeks and coldly contemplating my own egregiousness. I actually gave out loud a low laugh that harrowed myself. What! To suppose that all, all I could do, would prevent youth from coming together at the last!

So I made myself a spectacle of ridicule for myself.

Then, as the minutes passed, that which at first had seemed a pure and perfect whole of hopelessness changed subtly and began to separate into parts. And that brought such a change in me that I trembled to recognise it. The shock of those first moments had stunned me, but I was now coming out of my stupor. My first swift conclusion had been wrong. These were *not* young lovers whom mountains could not sunder. She, my sleeping beauty, who had but now opened her eyes, no doubt thought I was that; her soul was over-brimming; and I remembered her look of wonder and reproach when, after she had congratulated me on that love-rise that is the most wondrous of earthly dawnings I had given a puzzled "on what?" When hearts can no longer contain that with which they ache to bursting, lucky is the one who stands nearest to hand. His it is to have, for the lifting of his finger, what else would spill. He may not be athirst for the draught; a muddier liquor might quench his fire as well; but this dew and ichor is his, though another parch for it.

For I needed no pointers from Mackie to know young Archie now. This was his ignored and heaven-high luck, and he did not even want it. If their being together in that unlighted room—their

being together even as I sat with my head between my hands staring blankly at the yellow deal screen—if this meant anything at all it meant one thing and one thing only, that she must give because it was her nature to give, and the cub was philandering with her.

At that thought my despair gave place to something else. It was eaten up in the white flame of wrath that flashed like a brand in my brain.

“Oh!” I thought. “So *that's* it, my Archie? . . .”

I need not tell you again how I always have made my angers serviceable to me. Five minutes later—though my will was well-nigh deracinated in the process—I was its master again. It still struggled like a beast in my hold, nor did I know whence the help could come without which it would presently have me in its power again, but I still retained my throttling hold on it. One last wild struggle the beast made; this was when beyond the end of my screen-enclosed compartment, I saw them issue, with an interval of half-a-minute between their coming out of the library doorway. He was pink and triumphant; at her I forbore to look. A minute later Mackie passed and gave an infinitesimally small jerk of his head and a wink; but by that time I was holding my savage beast down again.

Then a bell rang; there was a buzz and move-

ment; the candidates were making ready again. Once more attendants read the caution, and then the second paper was distributed. Mechanically I turned over the gelatine-copied leaves that had been handed to me.

But I pushed them away again. 'A' man who is engaged as I still was—a luckless hunter who has missed his shot and is struggling desperately body to body with his intended prey—has little time for anything but the business in hand. True, I did draw the paper to me again and tick off the questions that would be productive of the highest marks, but it was long before I got any further. There would come between me and my page Archie Merri-dew's pink and boastful face as I had seen him issue from the library door.

I do not know how long I sat thus.

Draggingly at last I settled to work. But it was well-nigh hopeless. I came to myself after a long interval to find that I was staring blankly before me and muttering softly to myself. I had not written more than half-a-page. Wearily I tried again.

The next external thing that I was fully awake to was that from the typewriting-room there came the single "Ting" of the small clock on the mantel-piece. I started. That single "Ting" always meant one of two things—one o'clock or a half-hour. I had no watch.

I tried for a moment to persuade myself that the clock had just struck half-past two.

Then I heard the attendant's voice: "You have one hour left."

"Good heavens!" I groaned.

I drew my paper to me again.

For a time I was not conscious of anything but the questions that must be answered by half-past four. Indeed, so feverishly did I work that I did not hear the attendants announce that we had only half-an-hour longer. The next announcement I heard was that fifteen minutes only remained.

Swiftly and flurriedly I turned over what I had written. I was just half-way through the paper.

Wildly alarmed, I broke into rapid shorthand—the shorthand in which I am writing this now. I did not know whether the shorthand would be accepted; I only knew that in its larger aspect the object of the examination was to determine whether I was master of my subject. I was master of my subject. Those already diluted tests of capacity, the questions, dictated their own replies: I put on top speed.

"You have five minutes more," sounded the relentless voice.

But I could have sworn that not one minute elapsed before, much louder and more peremptory, came the final call:

"You must now cease writing!"

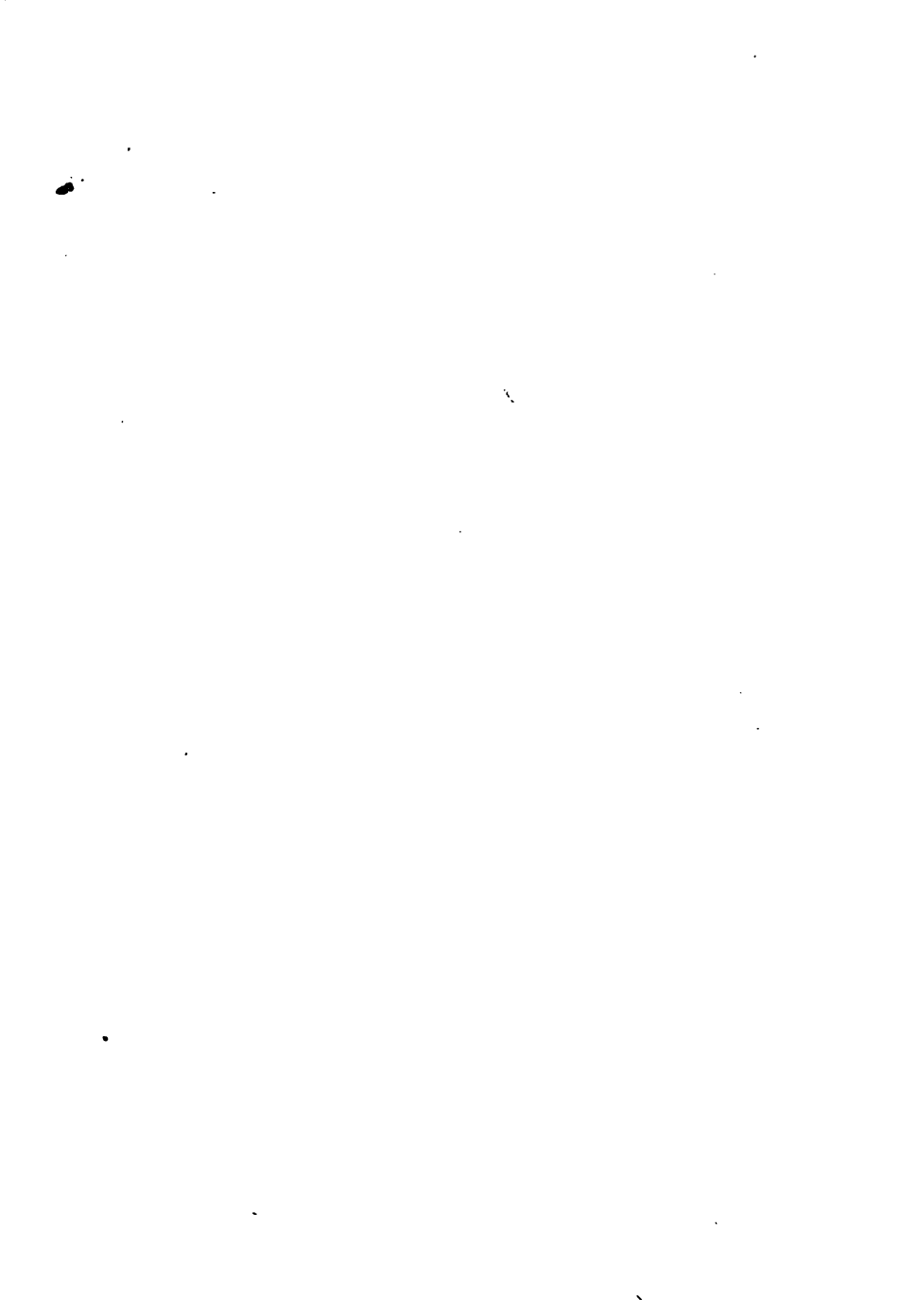
As I mingled with my fellow-candidates again I heard Mackie crying joyously, "Oh, we got medals for this in Paris!" But I passed him by without a glance. Nor had I any desire to linger about those premises my first sight of which in the daytime had cost me three shillings in cash, and a murderous rage that might indeed have closed the gates of heaven in my face. I went quickly for my hat and coat, almost colliding with Miss Causton as I turned a corner and muttering I know not what as she shrank back and gave me a look that I could hardly reconcile with her usually ironical and ruminating eyes. I merely wanted to get out of the place. . . .

But I did not escape so quickly but that I saw Archie and Evie following me down the stairs. No doubt they were going together to her aunt's to tea.

A week later I learned that I had passed with distinction in the Theory part of the paper, but had failed in the Practice portion. The examiners made a joke about "Paper Number Two," saying they had decided to hold it over for next year's shorthand examination. Everybody knew whose paper Number Two was. . . .

Mackie had passed in both portions.

PART II
WOBURN PLACE



I

SOME time or other during the period of my engagement to Miss Windus (an episode of my history I am now approaching), I happened to remark on the pleasant arrangement that had removed many of the temptations of London from Archie Merridew's path by giving him a "home from home"—the wholesome influence of the Soames' house in Woburn Place. My charmer agreed with me that no arrangement could have been happier. It is of that arrangement that I must now speak. But first I must tell you as much as I can recollect of the party with which the Christmas term closed.

Little as things of that kind appeal to me, I had been to that breaking-up party. Why I had deliberately sought this misery I find it difficult to say. It had been Miss Levey who, the very evening before the result of the Method examination had been announced, had broached the matter to me, and that of itself would doubtless have decided me had it not been for Miss Causton, who had come up just as I was refusing.

"Mr Jeffries says he won't come!" Miss Levey

had said, turning to Miss Causton, "but we want a few of the seniors as guests—you and Mr Mackie and Mr Weston—you're the lights of the college, you know."

I had been quite unaware that my mental comment on her "we" had shown in my face (she was quite twenty-five), but apparently it had, for she had added, with a laugh that had struck me as contemptuous even of herself, "Oh, I call myself a junior too!" and had turned away.

Of course I ought not to have gone, and, after I had learned of my failure in Method, I had been on the point of renewing my refusal. But then there had seized me an almost mad desire to see how much I really could endure with a smile (Evie and Archie, of course, had been among the first to accept). So the very thing that ought to have kept me away had driven me there. Of this extreme of perversity I am afraid I must ask you to find what explanation you can. I am merely setting down the thing as it occurred.

So I had gone, though, to Miss Levey's disappointment, *sans* "lady," and had had, moreover, the pleasure, such as it was, of also disappointing those who had expected that my failure in Method would plunge me into gloom. I was far beyond gloom. Mere gloom would not have expressed my feelings; it would have lacked the ecstasy of my misery. So

I daresay I had appeared, not less, but more cheerful than my ordinary, and perhaps that was even set down as courage that was merely the numbing of sensibility.

A most extraordinary experience to me that party had been. On the occasion of the Method examination screens and tables had had to be imported, but this time the opposite had been done, and all day half-a-dozen of the students had been busy, stacking desks and tables away in the old ledger-room and clearing the lecture-room for dancing. The senior classroom had been turned into a refreshment-room, and an upright piano had been got in and lifted upon Weston's lecturing dais. Blackboards indicated the way to the ladies' cloak-room (the library) and that of the men (the room with the washbowls), and by the time I had arrived, at half-past eight, everybody had assembled. Nine had been fixed as the hour when dancing was to begin.

Sisters and friends had brought up the number of women to perhaps a dozen, and Miss Levey had not failed to remark on my coming alone. Her short legs had started to bring her to me almost before I had looked about me.

"Oh, Mr Jeffries—then you *haven't* brought a lady friend!" she had reproached me. "I hope you understood that the invite was for two!" At this, setting my face into a rocky smile that had re-

mained on it thenceforward, I had looked at her over her fan.

"Oh?" I had said. "Then it was my 'lady friend,' not me, you wanted to see?"

But she had been equal to me. "Oh no—but there are three times as many gentlemen as ladies, you know. Come and let me introduce you——"

But I had evaded this, preferring, in the words of Mackie, who had passed just then, to "paper the wall."

From my station by the thrown-back folding-doors of the lecture-room, with that carved smile on my face for all the world as if my heart had been temporarily atrophied, I had been able to look even on Evie almost unmoved. The whole scene had been a haggard but quite painless nightmare to me. When, at nine o'clock, the piano had begun to play, I had watched the men in their black sparrow-tails and white gloves, stooping, posturing, offering arms, revolving, as if the picture had been a flat representation, lacking a dimension, the blackboard behind the pianist and the old bells like interrogation-marks above his head quite as important as the moving figures. And I had smiled and smiled. After all, one might as well smile as not. Once you had got the smile into its place it was just as easy. Really it would have been the taking of it off again that would have required the mental effort.

It was as I had stood there that Miss Causton had come up to me and asked me if I did not dance. Her voice, as she had done so, had hardly detached itself in my mind from the noise about us, and even her figure, lending as it were its own life to her dress of oyster-grey, had seemed no less flat and diagrammatic than the rest of the scene. "No," I had said, and "No," she had repeated, with a nod, "getting the piano up and down would be more your style, for it nearly killed those boys this afternoon. . . . But won't you let me teach you?"

"I've no gloves."

"Gloves!" she had said softly.

And so, since besides smiling one may as well dance as not, I had taken a dancing lesson from Miss Causton. But we had only gone twice round the room—for which, considering my weight, I could hardly have blamed her, and then, panting a little, she had proposed a rest. And in the very bay from which I had once overheard her conversation with Miss Windus I had talked civilities to her, still smiling. I had asked whether she was coming back after Christmas and had been told "Yes," and when, by-and-by, as being less trouble than thinking of a new one, I had put the same question to Miss Levey, I had got a "Yes" from her also. After that I had worked that question really hard, putting it at least once more to Miss Levey,

and once to somebody who was not at the college at all, after which I had found a new one, I forget what, making two quite useful social accomplishments. Once again Miss Causton had come up to me. "——since you don't come to me," I remember her saying; "I should like some coffee." But she had barely tasted the coffee I fetched her—I remember wondering whether I ought to take her to the coffee or fetch the coffee to her—and then, just in the middle of my third brilliant conversational find, she had suddenly got up and left me.

And so on. The last had been similarly phantasmagoric. I had smiled when Evie had come up and said reproachfully: "You can dance with Louie!" and again when she had said: "I should like something to drink—no, you mustn't fetch it—when you're asked for those things in the middle of a dance it means that somebody wants to sit out with you—but, oh dear! I forgotten that this was Archie's, and here he is! . . ." It hadn't hurt much but I had had enough. The last person I distinctly remember speaking to was Miss Levey, who had said that I really must bring "somebody" to the next social. They had still been dancing when I left.

Now that the disaster of my failure had befallen me, a year must elapse before I could make a second attempt; and so it became quite unnecessary that I

should return to the college after the Christmas vacation of a month. The faraway autumn would be early enough for that. The fees, small as they were, came fearfully heavy on me, and I could study in the Patent Office Library for nothing.

But I wished to return in January. My many reasons for this are clear to you. To the more obvious of them I will only add, that I seemed now to be doomed to remain at Rixon Tebb & Masters' for another year, and, now that that strange and rather frightening calm of that night of the breaking-up party had passed, I simply could not face the time ahead without the alleviation, or at least the change of pain, that the prospect of seeing Evie afforded.

So I decided to continue my course.

The days until the college should reopen on the 21st of February were—I almost said purgatory to me, but in truth they purged me little. It was the rainiest and muddiest of Christmas weeks; nobody was out of doors who had a fire to sit by and leisure to sit by it, and the streets were a bobbing of umbrellas and a squirting of mud about the turned-up trousers of men and the skirts of women lifted to their wearers cared not where. I tried to make the use of dubbin take the place of the resoling of my boots, and in my chamber, which was warmed only by my oil-stove, my garments never dried. It was

a short week at Rixon Tebb & Masters', we were paid short too, and I shall never forget my Christmas dinner of that year. For a fit of desperation and impotent rebellion took me. I went for a change to another "pull-up" than my usual one, and there paid tenpence for a wholly insufficient dinner. I rebelled, I say. I brought my fist down on the table, and out of sheer recklessness ordered the whole lot over again. This proved too much for me. I couldn't eat half of it, but I didn't care. How I was going to recoup myself for the double cost afterwards I didn't know. If I had to have more money, I knew I should have to get it somehow, that was all.

That was a villainous Christmas for me!

And I was alone—Archie at Guildford, Evie and her aunt I didn't know where, perhaps at Guildford too, everybody with homes to go to and faces to talk to over a fire. Archie's absence, too, cost me several sixpences—the price of the hot baths I could not very well ask for at his quarters while he was away. I spent my evenings in the Patent Office Library, where it was warm.

I was glad when Christmas was over. I felt somehow that I was not missing quite so much.

Then those who had been away for a holiday came back; the second and third weeks of January passed; and on the twenty-first, a Monday, I went to

the college again, as piteously joyful as if I had been an outcast returning to open and welcoming arms again.

There were changes at the college. New students had come, several of the old ones had left, among them Mackie, whose course was finished, and we had a new "professor," who, it was said, was to start an advertisement-writing class. But the biggest gap seemed to be left by Miss Levey and Miss Causton, neither of whom, in spite of their answers to my question at the breaking-up party, had returned. Miss Levey, indeed was not returning; she had got a job; and I do not conceal that this was a small relief to me. It put an end to the hints and guessings and pertinacities that might still further have embarrassed my not very clearly explained situation. But Miss Causton, I gathered, had merely not come back yet. As it turned out later, she did not come back. But nobody knew yet. So, until she should do so, Evie and Miss Windus remained our only two woman students.

It is plain that I had had to think out a plausible reason for my own return. I neither wished, nor would it have been credible of me, to be regarded as one of those high-and-dry relics (every college and school has them) who wear on to middle age seeing whole generations of juniors out, and become pathetic "institutions" merely because they

had not initiative to stop doing what they have once begun. So I had hit on an explanation of my reappearance that, as it subsequently turned out, cut two ways. In one of these ways it proved magnificently sufficient for me; in the other it proved inadequate with an inadequacy that I only partly rectified when I became engaged to Miss Windus. In a word, I had had an idea.

My idea was this:

Starting from the old "Method" course (which, despite my failure, I knew back and forth and inside out), I had begun to evolve for myself a whole new course of private study. Much of this, I anticipated, I should be able to pursue at the college; for the rest the British Museum and the Patent Office Library would serve. The germ of my notion lay (or at least began) in certain questions that bore on the consolidation of Commercial Distribution; and I fancied, rightly as it turned out, that my idea was in harmony with the broader developments of the day. More than that I need not say. All that concerns this story is that my new inspiration landed me straightway in a dilemma. On the one hand, the newness of the idea proved to be the foundation of my fortune, on the other, because of its very newness, and because it surpassed the terms of the then known, it appeared to those who wanted to know "what Jeffries was about," a subterfuge and

a blind for something else. In a small sense, as you are aware, it was that; in a larger one it emphatically was not.

It is odd what difference a New Year makes in such colleges as ours. The influx of new students always drives the older ones more closely together, so that a person with whom the previous term you had little more than a nodding acquaintance becomes, when you meet again, almost an old friend. You have memories and associations in common that the new-comers know nothing about, and quasi-amicable rearrangements are made. I may say at once that it was not this that finally drove me into Miss Windus's arms, but it helped in the early stages by breaking down other resistances, and so made our extraordinary subsequent relation possible.

Evie had told me, on the night when I had first walked home with her to Woburn Place, that she usually went home either alone or else with Miss Windus, who lived in Percy Street, Tottenham Court Road; and while I, of course, had gone no farther than the gate, Miss Windus, I knew, had on more than one occasion gone in to supper. In the new order of things (which included Archie's "home from home") the three of them not infrequently went to Woburn Place together, and I began to see his light near the Foundling Hospital

more and more rarely as I passed. Of course it didn't at all follow that because he was not in his own quarters he was at Woburn Place; I knew for a fact that very often he was not; and I learned from Mackie, whom I ran into one evening as I was returning from Rixon Tebb & Masters', and to whom I forced myself to talk, that on at least one recent occasion Master Archie had been seen flying a none-too-steadily-balanced kite in the neighbourhood of Leicester Square. The "home from home" was a capital one from the point of view of Mrs. Merridew, no doubt; but from that of Miss Soames the aunt, into whose house, whether she knew it or not, some whiff at least of another atmosphere was being brought, the thing seemed very open indeed to question.

Evie, I could see now, was lost in love of him; and I sometimes wondered whether I was not becoming hopelessly one-idea-ridden to suppose that it could all possibly end in any but the plain and obvious way—by her marriage to him. Changes that I shall speak of presently were taking place quickly in myself, and perhaps it was the first sign of them that sometimes, when I found myself utterly spent and broken, melodramatic magnanimities rose in my brain. In these moments I was tempted to throw up the struggle, to take myself off somewhere, and to leave them to arrange matters as they would.

I wonder—I wonder!—whether I should have had the strength to do it!

And I wonder too whether, had I done it, it would have been “strength” at all! I hardly think it would. I will not generalise about slack young men and blind and innocent girls; I am not concerned with collective morals; but I was concerned with the given case, and already saw how things would almost inevitably turn out. Archie, after the manner of his kind, would sandwich in his visits to Woburn Place with more suspect pleasures; presently there would come some accident of detection, or there would not; if there did he would make a more or less (probably less) clean breast of it, and if there did not it would become a question of how far he would go with Evie. At that also I could make a guess. A “home from home,” is not quite what it seems when the home contains a young creature who follows the befriended young man about with soft and adoring eyes; parents and aunts notice these things; one day something would happen; and Archie, who never took any other line, would take the line of least resistance and, seeing that it was expected of him, become formally engaged to her.

And then what? Ah, I foresaw that too!

She would be, as the expression goes, “no worse” for him. For that also he lacked the courage. He

would sloven himself and her into a love that would soon prove irksome to him, a bitterness to her, and pure only on a technicality. I knew his breed; To the best of them Woburn Place is Woburn Place, and Leicester Square Leicester Square; and to the worst of them these two things quickly interpenetrate and weld. And what would that mean for her? I looked at my love; I looked about me at other sad and disillusioned women who have survived their fair dreams as examples of the way in which this love-slovening actually works out; and I shuddered.

No, a magnanimous removal of myself would not have been "strength" at all.

Yet if you think I became engaged to Miss Windus merely that I might have a pair of eyes frequently in Woburn Place, there you are wrong again. I became engaged to her because I had no choice. The contributory causes were several. Among the earlier of them had been a conversation I had had with Archie Merridew a week before the examination in Method.

After I had been at pains to give out the information that I was engaged as it were at large and without further particularity, I had begun, as you have already guessed, to be the victim of my own ingenuity. Our committances have this way of taking matters into their own hands. I had quickly

found it impossible to be thus unspecifically betrothed. Too many questions had instantly sprung up, and Archie, if not Miss Levey, had known too much about the circumstances of my life.

At first I had tried to fob him off by speaking of "some girl in the City," but that had been useless. If that was so, he had wanted to know (probably having gossipped it all over with Miss Levey), why did I never see her in the evenings, and why was I so often at liberty on Saturday afternoons and Sundays? I had protested, I had made jokes. How, I had demanded, did *he* know where I passed my spare time? . . . Well, he knew (he had retorted) where I spent five evenings out of the seven!

Miss Levey, you see, had started him, and it amused him to go on.

And so his intrusiveness had begun to narrow me down to the college itself.

This had given me the choice of just two *inamorata*—Miss Causton and Miss Windus (for I still supposed that Miss Causton might walk into the college as usual any evening). To the latter lady I was at that time exceedingly averse; and on the night of this conversation of which I speak, after Archie had been almost beyond endurance jestingly importunate, I had all but declared myself point blank for the absent Miss Causton. (The conversation had taken place in his rooms.)

"The question is, Archie," I said gravely, looking at him with sharp doubt in my eyes, "can I trust you? I suspect you've already set something going, you know."

He had coloured a little. A mere honourable understanding was never in the least binding on him, and I was never quite sure to what extent the exaction of a definite promise would be so.

"Oh, dash it all, Jeff!" he had scoffed rather awkwardly, "anybody'd think you were ashamed of it! All I said was quite harmless—really——"

"I know," I had commented, "*meaning* no harm. Nine-tenths of the harm in the world's done that way. I don't know that I don't prefer the man who means harm; at least he knows what he's doing. . . . But why are you so curious about it all?"

His curiosity, I knew, was nothing more or less than a slack indulgence of his desire to hear a secret. He had too Miss Levey's racial gift of turning these things to account. But he had put it rather differently.

"Oh, just friendly interest," he had replied, slapping his jacket pocket. "Where did I put my cigarette case? . . . We *are* friends, aren't we?"

"Rather less so when you go chattering about me."

"Sorry, old man," he had replied contritely, though his contrition had been less for his blabbing than that I, apparently had taken it amiss. "I didn't think—you didn't tell me not—it slipped out——"

"Well, well—no great harm's done. But if I were you—" if I had hesitated it was merely for a private and subtle relish "—I'd take a memory powder, to use an expression of Miss Windus's."

(You will remember how I had come to overhear that expression, and you may see, by turning back, the precise context of the allusion.)

Archie had been sitting in his favourite attitude, with his stockinged feet against the pilaster of the fireplace. He had twinkled again.

"I don't think it *can* be Miss Windus," he had chuckled again. "Anybody can see you can't stand her."

"Oh? Sorry I've allowed that to appear."

"And the college isn't exactly swarming with girls," he had continued.

I had told him that he was dragging the college in entirely on his own responsibility.

"Oh no!" he had said promptly, with a far too cunning glance at me. "You don't put me off like that, old boy! I've got you down to that, and I'm going to hold you to it! Serve you right for your

dashed secretiveness! So if it isn't Miss Windus, and it isn't Miss Soames——"

At that I had been able quite calmly to jest. I had fetched up a laugh.

"Steady a minute," I had said. "If you're really bent on going into the Sherlock Holmes business you'll have to do it properly, you know—give reasons for your eliminations. Accuracy's everything. Let's have your reason for ruling Miss Soames out."

"Good old Jeff," he had remarked, laughing; "accurate even in his jokes! Well, say Evie's a young twenty, and you're a damned experienced old thirty—how will *that* do?"

I believe, taken with all the rest, that it had seemed to him perfectly conclusive.

"That's better," I had approved. "I only meant that if you're going to be methodical you must *be* methodical, that's all. Good mental training for you, my boy."

"So it is," he had agreed, with the forthcoming examination in his mind. "I say—we'll have a shorthand speed-test presently—but first I'm going to drag this out of you. . . ."

And by-and-by I had all but made the confession that it was Miss Causton whom I adored from a distance and hesitated to approach.

Another contributory source to this oddest freak

of my life was the terms on which I had returned to the college. That wide and unexpected development of my new studies was no explanation to anybody but myself; I had confessed myself, through Archie, to be in love; and the more closely I applied myself to my mysterious work the less mysterious did my whole conduct appear. Yet on the whole, even if Miss Causton had returned at once, I might at the last have feared the hazard with one at once so suspiciously open and problematically deep as she; and there was no allowing matters to remain as they were. There was only Miss Windus for it.

You see the mess I had landed myself in.

Yet my unhappiness in all this was only a part of a general change that was quickly leavening me throughout. It was a change altogether for the better. I was sick, sick of shifts and tricks and meannesses. I was no less sick of them in myself than I was when I encountered them in the Sutts and Polwheles among whom my life was passed. I panted for a clearer air and a more spacious prospect; I panted for these things because Evie had loosened the band that had confined the wings of my own spirit. And with my own spirit thus freed, I would find a way to escape from the cage of my circumstances. Once I had done with that old life I would have done with it for ever.

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And, strange as it may seem, it was because hope was at last greyly and tardily dawning for me that I entered into my last despicable tortuousness with Kitty Windus.

II

FOR as I got deeper into my studies I began to see in it nothing less than the finger of Providence that I had failed in the second part of the examination in Method. That frustration altered the whole course of my life. I am, of course, speaking in the light of subsequent events, but I see now what a mere pass would have meant—a sort of success no doubt—but a success in a narrow and short-reaching attempt.

Up to that time my plan had been to qualify myself by means of certificates, to find a billet elsewhere, and then, with Rixon Tebb & Masters' recommendation of steadiness and sobriety, really to begin in some firm where promotion was possible otherwise than by our bottle-neck of a junior clerkship. I had actually had the choice of no less than two such firms, and had been already wondering what I should do with my extra twelve shillings a week—for I should have begun at thirty shillings.

And then I had failed.

Well, heaven be thanked for it. In that failure I sounded, for the last time—but no; for the last time but one—the bass-string of my poverty.

For now, as I saw my new work gradually unfolding, it sometimes so excited me that I could hear my own heart thumping in my breast. Do you know that feeling—that in your brain there is already born, and growing apace, an idea that you do not believe to be guessed at by any creature in the world except yourself? As a matter of fact I now know that my idea was being simultaneously worked upon elsewhere. Sir Julius (then “Judy”) Pepper was pegging away at it in his back room in Endsleigh Gardens, hardly a mile from where I brooded over it myself; and if you have never heard of the association of Jeffries and Pepper you know very little about these things. Still, all was in darkness then save for that single ray far ahead that seemed to indicate a way out; and even now I have only just begun my life’s work—the keying up to concert pitch of certain branches of commercial distribution that, by the time I and my successors have finished, will make men wonder how such a phenomenon as, say, the railway strike of last year could ever have been possible.

Nor was this deepest peace that the man of action knows—his certainty about what his task in the world must be—the whole of my spirit’s unexpected re-birth. This held out the promise of material—and shall I say “ethical?”—well-being; and my eyes were now opened to more than that. I hesitate

to call this new thing "religion." I would rather define it as the clear and immutable knowledge that all things *do* work together to an end, good, bad or morally unconnoted. It was a perception of powers and forces, not at variance, but working in harmony towards some cosmic consummation. I don't think that is religion. I don't think it would save a soul. But it not only saved, but made altogether its own, my reason. I believed in the power and divinity of a thing, if not in those of a Being. And I believe that I should have got further even than that.

And if it be true that we treat the world as we are treated by it, this changed my attitude to all with whom I came into contact. I am not thinking now of Kitty Windus, for she, poor soul, was but an episode, though one I have found is hard enough to make away with. I am thinking of Sutt, of Polwhele, of the proprietor of my public-house, of the drivers and porters of my restaurant, of the men and women, seen and to be seen no more, who passed me in the streets. And I am thinking of Evie Soames.

For it was side by side with her sweetness that I conceived all this authority and strength and vision to exist. It was all, I knew not how, hers—hers and mine. I could not successfully resolve a problem nor work out an equation but something within me cried, "That is ours, my love!—something

seized from the limbo of things-not-known-yet, for you, dear, and for me!" I could now even bear to work away from her, in another room of the college, among the files of the Patent Office, at my own place. When her face rose, as it ever did, between me and my paper or page, I knew peace now, not jealousy. Had I put into words the thoughts that then filled me those words would have been, "Yes, my own—you see what I'm doing—it is for us, and it won't be long—go away, sweetheart, but not very far." And so I dreamed harder and worked harder than I have ever done in my life, and both came easily to me, because I had at last clearly seen my goal.

Yet you are not to suppose that I was not unwinkingly wakeful too. This was my inner life, and it informed, but did not abate, the vigilance of my outer one. I think that three times out of four I knew (at first at any rate) when Archie had been to Woburn Place, and perhaps twice out of four when he had sought a lower pleasure elsewhere. It would take too long to tell you how I ascertained all this. I did so under a mask of casualness that practice and my new-born hope had now made quite easy.

And so I come to my acceptance by Kitty Windus.

Espionage upon Woburn Place was only a part, and by far the lesser part, of it. I had my impos-

sible position to explain. And not only had I to explain it, but my original lie had left me only one other way of explaining it—the giving up of Evie once for all. That I could have more easily done months back than I could now that hope had brought her so (I speak comparatively) tantalisingly near. I admit that the chance that I might be introduced at Woburn Place as Miss Windus's *fiancée* did weigh, and horribly. I no longer hated her. I pitied her. I do not mean that this pity was in the least degree akin to love in that word's sense as between man and woman; but by salving a little my self-content it did, practically, help me to carry the thing out. But I swear, however much I may appear to put myself upon the defensive in doing so, that of itself the prospect of Woburn Place would not have swayed me.

I have not the heart to remember the earlier stages of my duplicity. Too many crawling things lie beneath that stone of my life for me to wish to turn it over. Let me summarise by saying that, by a slow and nicely calculated relaxing of my stiffness, and a gradual and lingering and gratuitous prolongation ever and again of certain opportunities of intercourse, I had, by the beginning of March, so counterbalanced my former aversion that, in a word, anything might happen, and at any moment.

Poor, lonely, starved spinster heart! I have far

more ruth for what I did to you than for what I did to another!

But let me, before I go on, see whether there was anything during the months of January and February that I may not omit. . . . No, I think there is little. Miss Causton still remained away; I pursued my new investigations; that segregation of newness of the first-year students relaxed a little, but without affecting that slight unconscious coming together of the older ones that it had brought about; and I think Archie Merridew divided his time between Woburn Place and Leicester Square pretty equally. I think that is all. I pass on.

It was in Lincoln's Inn Fields that I entered into a pledge with Kitty Windus that I had no intention of ever redeeming. I had not thought when I had left the college that night that it would come so quickly. I had planned a long walk, and, passing through Great Turnstile, had come upon Miss Windus looking into the window of an antique shop. I had stopped and gazed with her, and then, presently moving away, we had passed together into the square.

She told me afterwards that she had been merely aimlessly wandering, having been to Woburn Place the evening before and fearing to weary her welcome there by going again the next night; but I did not know this then. Therefore, when presently she stopped at the corner where the street leading to

Kingsway now is and said, "Well, I think I'll go back," I was a little surprised. Then I understood and laughed.

"I'm so sorry," I said, "I thought this was your way. I don't know that it's particularly mine—I was only taking a stroll—so if you don't mind I'll walk back with you."

Thereupon we turned back into the Fields.

It was this mutually made discovery that neither of us was pressed for time that brought simultaneously into our minds some slight self-consciousness that for the first time in our lives we should be thus killing an hour in one another's company. Her own embarrassment presently gave expression to this.

"How nice," she said, after we had walked half the length of the central garden railings in silence, "to feel sometimes that you haven't got to talk if you don't want to!"

The remark, commonplace as it was, gave me a new glimpse of her. I knew that she read a better class of novel than my Evie, and with the results you might suppose. I don't seriously believe that Evie's "scions of noble blood" and the rest of her novelette paraphernalia had any point of contact with real life for her, but Miss Windus carried over the triteness she got from her reading into her thought and speech. Therefore, since I myself,

though no eloquent speaker, believe that tongues were made to talk with, I again laughed a little.

"Yes," I replied, "provided always that you aren't silent merely because you've nothing to say."

I think this penetration, such as it was, struck her with quite remarkable force; and, as the novels provided no reply to it, she was again silent for a time. We were approaching the corner of Great Turnstile again, but I don't think she noticed it. We turned down by Stone Buildings and began to complete the circuit of the Fields.

"Mr Merridew said you were very clever," she remarked at last. "What *do* you study all by yourself in the senior classroom, Mr Jeffries?" she asked, the quizzical little triangles of her eyes turned up to mine in the light of a lamp that hung like a beacon over the garden railings. She wore a plaid Inverness cape and a boat-shaped hat that night, I remember, and would doubtless have worn rubber heels had those articles been invented. Never woman made a slighter physical appeal to man than she.

"I'm not quite sure myself yet," I replied, as truthfully as made no matter. "Part of it at any rate is human nature in business."

"I love human nature," she said.

I knew I had only to speak. In the light of the wrong I was about to do her I freely forgave her

all her past pretences towards myself. All grapes had been sour to poor Kitty, and I didn't doubt she had made brave attempts, and still braver concealments of failure. Baboon or anybody else, there she was at his pleasure so her reproach be but taken away. For already I had decided that it might as well be now as later.

"Yes," I answered, as if absently, and we walked on.

The night was slightly frosty, and over the houses to the north of the Fields the glare of Holborn shone rustily. There were few people about. As we walked, by this time almost used to the strangeness of one another's company, I wished that the central garden of the square had not been closed; at least she would have had the association of a tree and a plot of grass to go with her plighting. But I knew that such weaknesses as this were not safe, and shut peremptorily down on them. She seemed so pathetically small and skimpy by my side, and had I yielded even a little I could almost have persuaded myself of a tenderness for her. This I refused to do. I would do nothing to make easy for myself what would by-and-by prove cruel enough for her.

We were half way round the Fields on our second circuit before I spoke again. I moistened my lips and steeled myself.

"Miss Windus," I said.

I think a tremor took her instantly with my change of tone. She looked up, but I did not hear whether she said anything.

Nor did I say anything. Our hands, as we walked, were close together. I took hers.

She made no attempt to draw it away, and we walked so. Presently I took the hand in my other one, and this brought it across my breast. I daresay she felt the beating of my heart.

"Kitty," I whispered.

She pressed against me a little.

I don't think it ever entered her head that I intended anything but just that we should walk, for that one night, round Lincoln's Inn Fields like this. I don't believe she thought of anything. With even that heel and paring of love she was content—just to walk so, to-morrow if it was to be, if not then at any rate to-night, with her hand in a man's and her shoulder pressing lightly against a man's shoulder.

Well, she had it.

"Kitty," I whispered again. This was in a dark shadow on the south side of the Fields. Without prearrangement we had ceased to walk, and were standing together, she with her face turned downwards and away, quite ready to give me all she supposed I wanted of her.

She couldn't murmur my name in return. She

didn't know it. It was, for her, merely "Man." But instead she gave me that for which I stooped over her. She gave it with a heartrending impulsiveness throwing back her head suddenly and leaning her bosom on mine. I felt a pair of dry, slightly cracked lips on my own and was conscious of an odour of clothes. . . . Then we separated again.

"Oh," she said, with a shaky little exhalation of her breath, "I . . . I didn't think you'd ever look at me—Jeff!"

This last was a quick invention, to cover her ignorance of my Christian name.

She meant that she hadn't thought that anybody would ever look at her. Every shred of the old pretence of the pertinacities and annoyances of strangers had fallen from her. She lifted up her face again—and again—as if by present gluttony to forestall insatiable hungers of the morrow and the morrow after that.

For a minute I was well-nigh resolved out of sheer compassion to keep my word and marry her.

And even then—think of it!—she had no idea that I contemplated what was, indeed, my sole reason for action—an acknowledged engagement. She never dreamed I meant to marry her. It was I who spoke of this, half-an-hour later. By that time we had been to the bottom of Chancery Lane and back, and were in the Fields again, once more in that same

shadow where I had kissed her first. She looked at me.

I can hardly write it. There was first a gleam of fear in her eyes, and then a leaping.

"*Jeff!*" she cried in a loud voice that cracked.

I had to catch her as she began slowly to sink at the knees.

So I became engaged. At the college it was a nine days' wonder, but I let them wonder. So did Kitty Windus, merely pretending that the thing had been for long a secret understanding. Archie, I remember, smirked through some form of congratulation when I told him: "What, *not* Louie after all!" but it was only when Evie Soames flung her arms about Kitty Windus' neck and well-nigh about mine also that I began really to wonder what could possibly come of it all.

III

DURING those little pauses and lapses of study in which men scribble abstractedly on the margins of paper, idly forming letters or noughts-and-crosses or inexpert attempts at portraiture, I myself had a way of filling my blanks at that time that may serve to explain the change that had more and more come over me. I used to rub with a pencil, as evenly as possible, two little squares of grey, and then to put into the middle of the first of them a spot as black as my pencil could make it, leaving in the second a similar spot, but one of clean white. Unless you have tried it you may not believe the difference in effect. The black spot of the first seems to make denser and darker the whole square; but the white one lightens and relieves it as the sun does when it struggles through a mist. By what law of optics this is to be explained I cannot tell; I can only say that if Kitty Windus, wondering what I studied all by myself in the senior classroom, had come upon me at these times, she would have found me pondering over these marginal trifles as in some way a symbol of my own life.

For had it not been for this gloomy blot of my

betrothal to her I would not now have exchanged my life for that of any man I knew. So did hope now irradiate it. I was still an eighteen-shilling 'Agency clerk; I still lived in a red and green loft over a public-house; but I now believed in myself, longed to be able to respect myself, and had already grimly resolved that others should respect me.

I was in this state of mind when I first set eyes on Angela Soames.

I was taken there, of course—to Woburn Place, I mean—by Kitty Windus. It was within a week of our engagement, so that I had not to wait long for these first-fruits of my extraordinary position. That night was the second time I walked with Evie to her abode, for Archie followed a few yards behind with Kitty Windus. We had dropped into this arrangement on leaving the college, as men tacitly pay each other's partners the courtesy of their attentions.

When I have said that Evie's home was in Woburn Place I have gone a long way towards describing it. She lived in one of those large apartment houses that are full of Japanese, Americans, and Indian law students, with a half-pay officer here and there. She and her aunt had rooms of their own upstairs, but they dined in the large common dining-room downstairs, at a table that would almost have resembled that of a public dinner had it not been

for the gaps left by the absent boarders, several of whom were always dining elsewhere. I never saw that table full. I have tried to carry on a conversation with my neighbour across two intervening empty chairs. I have had to accept the highly polished civilities of Indians and Japanese, who have refused to disturb me when I have removed a rolled napkin in a numbered ring and put a flat and freshly ironed one in its place. One met niggers and gouty subjects and antiquated old ladies in the hall and on the stairs; and I was quite prepared to find Miss Soames the aunt one of these last.

But she was not in the least so. There was not very much more difference between her age and my own than there was between mine and Evie's—though of course what difference there was was all on the wrong side. She was, I should say, forty-three or four, and I wondered the moment I saw her how she had got through these forty odd years and remained Miss Angela. Let me say at once that she had no secret sorrow (though Kitty always vowed she had). When, later, she told me, with the greatest self-pluming in the world, that she "could have been married" more than once or twice, she told me nothing I should not have guessed; but merely to have had these opportunities seemed entirely to content her detached and unruffled and rather aimless soul. She had had the refusal of them—and she coquetted

with that. She had avoided the pains of marriage—and remained the white-haired *ingenué*. It later became one of Kitty's irritating tricks to "wish she had hair like that"—a beautiful tower of it dressed *à la Marquise*; but in nothing else could Kitty ever have resembled Angela Soames. . . . But perhaps I may be wrong in my estimate after all. Perhaps no man can really understand that kind of woman, who cannot lose all herself even when she marries and loses not very much less when she does not. Evie, I concluded, probably had her passion for abandonment from her mother.

I was introduced to the elder Miss Soames in her sitting-room. This apartment, like herself, seemed to trail even into Woburn Place hems and fringes of past prosperity. The room itself was not much more than a cold-blue-papered, corniceless box—but, as the first of a number of odd little contrasts, a shield-shaped embroidered firescreen hung on a slender stem near the fire. The door was painted yellow and grained—but a pair of handsome silver candlesticks stood on the mantelpiece. There was a threadbare lodging-house carpet—and a black bear-skin hearthrug, the head of the animal worn bald by Miss Angela's paste-buckled slipper. And so on. On the round table stood a rosy-shaded lamp (that did *not* change to a corresponding shade of green as you looked). Miss Angela herself wore a soft old grey

with a thin Indian silk shawl cast over her shoulders, and I remembered, as I looked at her, certain former angry conclusions I had come to about her. I took them all back. Charminglly unsure of herself in everything, from her love affairs downwards, she might be, but she did not parrot precepts about the "less fortunately circumstanced." We shook hands, and I was told that I might smoke. Archie had come in smoking.

I did not talk very much during this my first call. Indeed, Miss Angela murmured, as if to herself, some half-mischievous, half-tactful remark about an "ordeal"; and my slight nervousness passed as part of Kitty's "showing off" of me. But the others made up for me, and I listened, smiling, but silent except when I was directly addressed.

This I presently was by Miss Angela, and on a point no less interesting than the way in which Archie spent his evenings. It had already appeared that he was to celebrate a birthday two days thence, and Miss Angela had asked him to spend the evening with them.

"You've given us a very cold shoulder lately," she said; "why, your mother's been remarking on it!" She pulled a faded tapestry hassock towards her with her foot, the fire being too hot to allow her to make use of the bear's head, and reached for a paper fan with which to keep the heat from her face. "I hope it's

not *you* who take up all his time, Mr Jeffries?"

I answered that it was not, and Evie, who had removed her hat and coat and was now tidying her hair before the mantelpiece mirror, laughed.

"Mr Jeffries' time is spoken for now—isn't it, Kitty?" she said.

I saw her look at Archie as she said it. He was astride the hearthrug, allowing the smoke of his cigarette to stream up his nostrils, and she, as she arranged her hair, had to look at herself almost over his shoulder. Her occupation left the whole of her young bosom quite defenceless had there been a pair of arms to pass about it, and the soft look she gave him was a double provocation. But he did not return the look. He moved a little aside, also finding the fire hot, and flipped his cigarette ash into the fender.

"I don't think an engaged girl ought to come between a man and all his old friends," Kitty pronounced. Her look at me was a promise that she would never come between me and Archie.

Miss Angela gave a contented little laugh.

"Ah, you all say that at first! Well. . . ." She glanced past Evie at me, and took me into her confidence with a private smile. It was as if we two older ones understood that there was something in process that must not be disturbed. "But if you don't come, Archie," she added, "I shall write

straight to your mother! You'll come too, Miss Windus?"

Kitty glanced at me.

"Oh, of course I mean Mr Jeffries too!" said Miss Angela archly.

"Oh, of course him too!" quoth Archie, from the hearthrug, loosening his scorching trousers. "Two hearts that beat as one—you bet—twopence into a penny show *now*, Jeff!"

And again Miss Angela, with a look this time past him, seemed to invite my attention to something.

You may guess that my attention needed little inviting. So far, my surmise, that she adored him while she took the admiration a little impatiently, seemed to be pretty near the mark; and I was confirmed in this when she presently sat down on the companion hassock beyond the end of the fender, and, with her face a little averted, sank into moroseness. It was merely because her glance as she stood before the mirror had not been returned, but I myself had known too well what it was to be uplifted and cast down again by these nothings not to understand.

And Archie too understood, if the jocular and would-be easy manner in which he tried to drag her into the conversation again meant anything. I suspected that this was not the first incident of the kind that had occurred between them. Presently he had twice addressed her directly without getting more

than the shortest of replies; and the third time he did so (he, Kitty and Miss Angela had been talking about some indifferent matter) he added the words, "that is, when Evie's found her tongue again."

My darling had a temper of her own. "I didn't know I'd lost it," she said, with a little perverse snap.

Then she dropped into her sulks again.

"These lovers' quarrels!" Miss Angela's private smile to me seemed to say; but this time I evaded the discreet invitation to participate.

"Well," Archie said presently, looking at his watch, "I must be off; I've a chap to meet. Thanks, Aunt Angela (beg pardon; I know you don't like being called that). I'll come on Thursday, then."

But Miss Angela exclaimed: "A man to meet! At this hour!"

Archie took his hat from a chair. "Yes. About a dog. Why not? Fox terrier," he added facetiously; "must make sure they've got over the distemper, you know. Thursday then. You two are staying a bit, I suppose?" he invited us.

He made his adieux; but almost before the door had closed behind him Evie had risen from her hassock.

"You'll excuse me, won't you?" she said quickly. "I've got a headache. I shall go straight to bed. Good-night."

And she followed him out—whether straight to bed or not I don't know. Kitty and I followed shortly afterwards.

And now that I've got to this Woburn Place portion of my story I may as well, while I am about it, skip the two intervening days and come to the evening of Archie Merridew's birthday.

Thursday was not in any case one of Evie's class evenings, and on that Thursday she must have been very busy indeed. We were to go to supper at eight; and as the routine of the boarding house did not provide for private entertainments the aunt and niece had had all to do themselves. The supper was therefore of necessity cold, with the exception of some hot soup, which I suspect to have been heated over a bedroom fire; and for the furnishing of the round table with the pink-shaded lamp Miss Angela had rummaged in drawers and trunks and bundles, with notable results. White heavy plates with the name of the boarding house contained within an oval garter were set between common knives and delicate and worn old silver forks and spoons, really beautiful glass finger-bowls stood on straw mats with a circular hole in the middle; and a long slender-handled punch-ladle stuck up out of the cheap earthenware jug full of home-made lemonade.

I suspect, too, that Evie had changed her mind a dozen times about the height of her dress at the

neck; and probably her aunt's guidance had led her finally, since she had no special dress for the evening, to reject the compromise of altering her blouse to an intermediate V. Her dark hair had been newly washed. A softer lace than Kitty Windus' came quite up to her ears, and Miss Angela had lent her a pearl ring, which seemed to be mutely asking to be transferred to the finger next to the one on which she wore it. She was in white, with a longer skirt than usual; Miss Angela wore the old grey and Indian silk shawl she always wore; and Kitty looked prettier than I have ever seen her in a spotted blue foulard (I think I have that right) with wonderfully crimped sleeves and a cameo brooch at her rather wiry throat.

She and I arrived before Archie, who, indeed, was a full quarter of an hour late. When he did turn up, there mingled with his apologies the bump-tious assumption of ease with which he sought to make a joke of his negligence. He came in noisily, as if he intended to make the party a success out of hand; and before he had been in the room half-a-minute a whiff told me what I had instantly surmised from the brightness of his eyes—that he had been drinking sherry and bitters already.

“Thanks, Aunt Angela—but that's not all, I hope!” he cried, as Miss Angela wished him many happy returns of the day.

And he skipped to her, passed his arm about her waist, and kissed her.

"Hope you won't mind for once, Jeff," he went on, dancing to Kitty Windus. Kitty both stiffened rigidly and flushed with excitement as he kissed her also on the cheek-bone.

"Here—I'm going all round now—where's Evie?" he demanded.

But Evie had slipped out of the room.

We sat down to supper.

I found Archie insufferable. He made the whole running with an ignorant egotism that caused my fingers to itch to box his ears. More than once he contradicted Miss Angela flatly, instantly trying to redeem the grossness by laughing loudly and crying, "Excuse my frankness—no offence—only Archie's way!" He made so familiar both with Kitty and myself that, out of mere hostility to him, I came very near to an alliance with her. Evie, I saw, was miserable. How much she knew about his habits I could only guess; I think that already she knew more than a little; but his had been the fortune to reveal her to herself, and I am not sure whether that ever wholly dies. I think it has since died as much as ever it can.

"But," Miss Angela said by-and-by, seeking to quieten him, "I've forgotten to ask you how your father is. Better, I hope?"

“The pater? Oh, he’s all right; it’s only a bilious attack. Afraid he got poisoned with some *foie gras* he ate—jolly good tack *I* call it—I’ll have some more, please. And what’s that you’ve got to drink there, Evie?”

Evie poured him out some lemonade. He looked at it, but made no remark on it.

“Here’s your *foie gras*—have some cress with it,” said Miss Angela.

And so we fêted his lordship.

After supper there were nuts and almonds, which we ate sitting round the fire. I say “we,” but Archie had what was left afterwards. With a “Half-a-mo,” he had gone out, and I myself thought our party much pleasanter without him.

But as he remained away, Miss Angela had no choice but to say presently: “What *can* have become of our young man? I wonder if you’d mind fetching him, Mr Jeffries!”

I went, and found him.

He had picked up, on the stairs or in the hall, a Japanese with whom he had contracted some sort of acquaintance, and I heard his call as I passed the half-open door of the dining-room.

“Here—Jeff!” he called. “Hold on—I sha’n’t be a minute—come and let me introduce you to Mr Shoto—Mr Shoto, Mr Jeffries.”

I distrust that too affable little race from the

other side of the world, and I gave Mr Shoto the most perfunctory of nods. Archie was having a very golden whisky and soda with him.

"Come along—you oughtn't to clear off like this," I said curtly. "Miss Soames is asking for you."

"All right—good old Angela—just a minute till I finish this. We were talking about Japan, or rather Mr Shoto was. Tell him that about the Yoshiwara, Shoto."

But that cunning little alien had evidently summed me up already, and had a different choice of subject for me.

I haled Archie back. I wondered, as he sat down by Evie, whether he would have another man about another dog to see presently, but he hadn't. Magnanimously he gave us the whole of the rest of the evening. This he did in spite of the cold encouragement he got from Evie. Twice, I was certain, while his face did not cease to be animated with the talk he gave the rest of us, his hand sought hers behind the arm of his chair; but she drew away. Nevertheless she drew away discreetly. By doing so openly she could have shown him up, but evidently she did not wish to show him up. There was no irreconcilable difference between them. She was angry, but not to the point of refusing to make it up afterwards. And I knew she was not far from unhappy tears.

Kitty and I were the first to leave. This was at

half-past eleven, and I had no desire to outsit Archie. He would either leave in another half-hour, which would leave him time for another golden whisky and soda, or, setting the smoothing over of Evie's ruffled temper before the attractions of the public-house, would linger till after closing-time, when there would be no hurry. To see which alternative he would take didn't on the whole seem to be worth waiting for.

So Kitty and I took our leave; and as I walked with her to Percy Street—where she had two rooms over a modiste's—I—and she too—had to suffer as best we might the kind of thing I will relate in the next chapter.

IV

FROM the beginning she wanted one thing, I another. She was prepared to "love" me (as if it had been a matter of will, to which, nevertheless, I am quite certain she would faithfully have adhered) on the condition that that heart of hers should be no longer a parched pod; but I wanted no more of her than that my name should be linked with hers as that of her suitor. To me the appearance was the indispensable thing; she wanted the substance. And she was already plaguing me for it.

God knows I gave her what I could give. Afterwards, when all was over, she still had the memory of it. I hope she found comfort in it.

For of course it was precisely over that which was Evie's, and which I was resolved to keep for Evie, that we were locked in a grapple. She lisped and besought and cajoled. Before I began sometimes utterly to forget that we were betrothed at all I could often have groaned aloud at her inexpert playfulness; and I doubt whether the wit of man could have devised a more acute torture than that which I now began to undergo at her unsuspecting hands.

For Archie's birthday was early in March, and already the crocuses were out, and the barrows in the streets were so aflame with daffodils that the flowers almost illuminated the faces of the sellers of them. It was still cold and backward, but the days were long past the turn, and while single twigs were still of a wintry iron hue, in the mass they took a softness, and the vistas of the parks had perceptibly changed. In the streets of the wealthy in which I walked the house-painters were at work, painting doors and railings and window-boxes; and even at my King's Cross corner the railway companies' announcements told of the coming summer. Spring was breaking in London—spring, the merry time of the year—spring, when lovers cannot keep asunder—and when Kitty and myself could not, yet must, keep asunder.

In the streets I knew I was fairly safe. Her hand on my sleeve filled me with no repugnance. Let me, for example, tell you of our walk back to Percy Street on that night of Archie's birthday-party.

As we crossed Tottenham Court Road she slipped her hand into my overcoat pocket, and my own encountered it there. It held it. It retained it along dark Percy Street, and still retained it when we stopped together at the side door next the window with the two fly-blown hats on pedestals that formed

the whole of the modiste's display. There I would have left her; but "Don't go just yet, Jeff," she begged; "just eentie walk?"

"Well, a short one," I said.

We turned up Fitzroy Street into the Marylebone Road, but I was wary of the dark empty spaces about Regent's Park. The streets and the crowds for me. Indeed I may say that during this period of our "walking out" no couple in London sought solitude as I sought to avoid it; and I resolutely suppressed the thought of what was going to happen when the warm days should come and she should ask me to take her to Richmond or Epping or Kew. It was no good meeting that horror half way.

Therefore. "Well," I said, as we approached Portland Road Station again, "hadn't we better be turning? It's getting late."

"I suppose so," she sighed reluctantly, with a pressure of my arm. "Let's go this way."

She indicated one of the darker side streets. We took it.

By-and-by we stood by the modiste's window again. That is not a very reputable neighbourhood, and as she stood there, lingering out our talk to the thinnest of excuses, I guessed what was in her mind. But the general environment of laxity only produced a primness in her. In being all that she should be, she was sometimes a good deal more. Still, there

was no harm in dallying with a secret thought.

But under all circumstances she ever displayed a sort of tempted prudishness.

"You and Evie and Miss Soames must come in one Sunday and have tea with me," she said resignedly at last, allowing the thought that some day I might go up with her to recede.

"That will be charming," I replied.

Then she sighed. "It has been so lovely tonight!"

"In what way?" I asked, forcing a smile.

"Archie was horrid, and you, Jeff——"

Yes, I remembered that hostility to Archie certainly had resulted in a *rapprochement* between ourselves.

"Well," she said at last, lifting her face, "good-night, dearest—I know who *I* shall dream of!"

I kissed her, heard the sound of her key in the lock, and, turning, saw her little face still looking through the half-closed door after me. I returned to King's Cross by way of Woburn Place, but there was only a glimmer of light within the fanlight of Evie's dwelling as I passed. Perhaps Archie had chosen the whisky and soda after all.

I soon saw that only by means of a studied unemotionalness should I be able for long to head her off from the things she sought; and I set about the creation of this atmosphere without loss of time. In this I found my far-reaching ambition useful to me;

I had simply to be preoccupied with business to be spared much. I had not to play this part. I actually was a ferment of new plans. That my absorbing ambition was all for her sake was allowed to pass as understood. And when she began to make touching attempts to be interested in my affairs, I, lest a worse thing should befall me, encouraged her. I talked fully and freely, knowing that I ran no more risk of betrayal than Napoleon did when he laid before a Russian peasant woman unacquainted with French the plan of campaign he feared to trust to his own staff. This I did as the almonds pushed forth their pink, and the plane-trees budded, and the building birds sang loudly. Once she called me her building bird.

I had had to tell her, vaguely, about my employment; and I was also vague about where I lived. Here her own tempted timorousness helped me. It was not difficult for me to be stern about the proprieties, and indeed, as she saw this, and began to feel perfectly safe with me, she even affected a liberality of thought. "Why not?" she would sometimes ask almost defiantly; "why not see one another in our own places—if there was nothing horrid?"

And for that I usually found a surprised stare answer enough.

But the hunger was on her, and I had to give her

morsels. That was a haggard horror. It was the more horrible that her vanities always turned on the things of which she had the least reason to be vain. As an affectionate and devoted and dull spinster my heart was often soft to her; but her coquetries would have made an angel groan. For example: her hands were not remarkably pretty; her fingers had almost the pinkness, and a little of the shape, of the smaller claws of a freshly boiled crab; but she gave them no rest from display. I was sometimes commanded, with a vapid imperiousness, to make much of them. And once, on a seat on the Embankment, she yielded to a temptation never far removed from her. It was at night; unnoticed, a portion of her hair had shaken loose; and, suddenly becoming aware of this, and doubtless with some idea of maddening me with the thought of something prohibited, she put up her hands, shook down the short mass on her shoulders, and grimaced at me. The next day she begged, with a shamed face, that I would try to forget this sin in her—for apparently she had intended it as sin; but I had nothing to forget. All that I remembered was the contrast, as she had put the hair up again, between the bosom under her uplifted arms and that other bosom from which Archie Merridew had turned away as Evie had stood before the mantelpiece mirror in Woburn Place.

Her dwelling, which I first visited with Evie and

her aunt, was on the first floor of the modiste's at the back. Her sleeping apartment I never saw; and of her sitting-room I have no very clear memory now. There was a penny-in-the-slot gas-meter on the landing, I remember, and the floor of the room into which one walked was covered with a greenish jute "art square," with the wide spaces of bare boarding about it stained with Condyl's Fluid. The previous occupant had left on the walls a "French boudoir" paper with a pattern of thin vertical lines and tiny garlands of pink rosebuds (Kitty had cleaned it with dough on taking possession). The furniture was scanty, with a good deal of muslin about it, and a sewing-machine stood in the back window, which looked over a restaurant yard. When she had more than two visitors at once she had to fetch an extra chair from her bedroom, and from the sound her heels made at these times I gathered that that room was uncarpeted.

As by quickening degrees she began to accept her unlooked-for situation more as a matter of course, her thoughts naturally turned to the future and that I found to involve her whole attitude to Life. The things we were to do "when we were married" were dictated by the narrowness of her outlook. She had about a pound a week of her own money, I don't know exactly where from, but I think from some tramways Edgbaston way, and this sum, together with

whatever she might be able to earn for herself, was practically the limit of her conception of any income she was ever likely to have. From the stories she told me of her earlier years I gathered that she came from a social stratum in which the men are lords indeed, sometimes "in work," sometimes "out," and apparently content during these last vicissitudes to be dependent on their wives or sisters or mothers. It seemed to me such a pitiful little world, of milliners, lodging-house keepers, music-mistresses, fancy needlewomen and daughters in offices; and I was given the corresponding male standing. As with the men her cousins (her nearest relatives) had married, if I should ever happen to earn money, well and good; if not, so much the worse. She reckoned only on her weekly pound and her own efforts. And as I learned that Cousin Alf and Cousin Frank were boundlessly optimistic, and looked forward to a future no less bright than that of which I felt the certitude within me, I soon discovered that I was merely indulged in what in her heart she set down as vapourings. It was the woman who, in her experience, "kept the home together," and she was prepared to keep me.

"Well," I laughed, "I daresay I shall learn to pare the potatoes as well as Cousin Alf in time."

But she smiled a sad, wise little smile. I might joke, but she knew.

"And it's just possible that some time or other I may make a pound or two," I said, smiling back.

"There'll be your clothes and pocket-money," she replied.

So I was to be kept—kept by virtue of my masculinity, as one keeps a dog to bark. I was to be kept, I divined, somewhere in a suburb, in a house the smallness of the rent of which would be exactly balanced by the increased cost of the season ticket that would take me daily to my work, when I was "in." Even when I was "out" I was to be treated with a nice consideration, for she "never had liked to see Frank washing up—it looked so unmanly," but as she said nothing about cleaning boots or fetching coals, these things apparently were not unmanly. And I wondered whether the Alfs and Franks were more numerous than I had thought, or were becoming so. Small wonder their women treated them with almost contemptuous tolerance, blazing out once in a while into a row. And I now see that in this sense I wronged Kitty when I said she was one of Life's takers. There are always two sides to a thing, and on this side she wanted nothing but to give.

But, willing as she was to do all this in the future, I soon discovered that she wanted her small solatium in the present. In the matter of little treats and outings I did not compare very favourably even with her Franks and Alfs. As you know, I simply had

not the necessary shillings. And so I began (I knew) to appear "near" and "close" to her. One Friday evening, as we left the college together, she allowed as much to be seen.

"Jeff," she said suddenly, as we approached the corner by the Oxford together, "do you know, you've never taken me to a theatre yet!"

Personally I have never greatly cared for the theatre; but it happened that I had spoken to her once or twice rather off-handedly that evening, and was not unwilling to make amends. Besides, the theatre might save a walk in Hyde Park. I pumped up a vivacity.

"No more I have," I replied. "Good idea. It's too late to go to-night, but we might have a walk round and see what's on."

She fell in with the suggestion gleefully, and we walked down Charing Cross Road and Shaftesbury Avenue, looking at theatre announcements as we went. At the Circus we turned along Coventry Street, and presently found ourselves opposite the Prince of Wales'. I think it was *La Poupee* that was running there; if it wasn't it was some other piece that seemed light; and as I like, when I do go to the theatre, to be amused rather than instructed, I plumped for *La Poupee* as against Kitty's suggestion—some stern and ennobling tragedy. I had drawn my week's money that evening. It would be a sorry business if,

with all those years of Alfing and Franking before me, I could not once in a while spare five shillings out of my eighteen; and so we elected for *La Poupee* for the following evening.

We went. We waited for perhaps two hours outside the pit door, but, as Kitty said when at last we did get inside, our places were worth it. When we were married, she said, we ought to be able to afford at least one theatre a month—she didn't in the least mind going to the gallery—and it would be something to think about for the next month. She didn't intend, when we were married, to get rusty. We were going to have our little outings like other married people, and if I continued, when we were married, to like light things and she serious pieces, we would choose in turn. And so on. I only half heard. I was spreading my remaining ten shillings over the week to come—ten shillings, mark you, not thirteen, for I had had to buy Kitty a ring, for which I was paying at the rate of three shillings a week.

Nothing happened at that performance of *La Poupee*. I am merely telling you this in order that you may see exactly how we stood, not at the crisis of our lives, but during the intervening stretches. I added to the problem of the coming week by giving a shilling for a box of chocolates, and no extravagance I have ever committed brought me a richer return than Kitty's look of pleasure. I suppose that

really this was all that was demanded of Alf and Frank—a trifling, unexpected superfluity once in a while. Lucky fellows! I, however, was neither a Frank nor an Alf, my dreams were not the mere beguilings of an idleness; and neither during my courtship (my real one, I mean) nor thereafter was I going, in any woman's heart, to lord it on so little.

I REMEMBER the Sunday on which Evie, Miss Angela and I first took tea with Kitty Windus for two reasons. The first was that Miss Angela, who at first had begged to be excused, had come after all (knocking on the head my plan of walking back with Evie alone). And the second was Kitty's asking me to remain behind after the others had taken their departure.

We had gone at four o'clock; and even as the three of us had walked towards Percy Street together (I had picked the others up on my way) I had wondered what had suddenly come over Evie. She had seemed pale and jumpy and morose, and had scarcely spoken a word during the whole of our walk. Nor had she said very much more as we had eaten the hot muffins and drunk the tea Kitty had provided. Indeed, the greater part of the talk had been between Miss Angela and myself, and even that had languished.

Then suddenly Miss Angela had said something that had, I thought, explained matters. Archie's father, whose illness Miss Angela had asked about

on the evening of the birthday-party, had taken a sudden turn for the worse, and Archie had been summoned to Guildford the day before.

“Well, we must hope for the best,” Miss Angela had concluded. “There’s no need to begin moping yet, child——”

Miss Angela also had jumped at my own explanation of Evie’s moodiness—that now that Archie was in trouble his misdoings were forgotten.

I was to learn my error half-an-hour later, when Evie and her aunt rose to depart.

I, of course, had intended to leave with them; but as I held the door open for them to pass out Kitty said: “You stay for a few minutes, Jeff; I’ve something to tell you. . . . Good-bye, Evie dear. I do hope your cold will soon be well, Miss Soames——”

And she waved her hand to them as they passed down the stairs.

I swore under my breath, but there was no help for it. I followed Kitty back into her sitting-room. She crossed to the fireplace and sank into a canvas deck-chair with her back to the sewing-machine. I remained standing, with my hat in my hand, at the other corner of the mantelpiece.

She had allowed her head to fall back against the sagging canvas, and had closed her eyes.

“Sit down,” she said, without opening her eyes,

and, wondering what was wrong, I reached for her bedroom chair and sat down.

"What's the matter?" I asked, a little alarmed already, though I knew not why. I wondered if anything had been discovered about myself. There were, as you know, plenty of such things to discover.

Her eyes still remained closed, but her head fell a little on one side. It was not until I had asked her again what was the matter that she spoke.

"It's—it's dreadful!" she moaned. "I—I can see you haven't heard——"

"What is? Come, come!" I said, with some concern but more impatience. "No, I've not heard anything to take on like this about—unless you mean something about Archie's father? . . ."

"No, it's nothing to do with Archie's father. Oh, I can't possibly tell you, Jeff——"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say that in that case it was of little use my remaining; but she went on.

"Just a minute," she said. "You haven't heard . . . about Louie Causton?"

I was certainly surprised. You will remember that I had not set eyes on Miss Causton since the evening of the breaking-up party, when she had danced twice round the room with me, sought me out again subsequently, and told me what the result

had since falsified—that she was returning to the college in the new term.

“No,” I said abruptly. “What about her? Nothing wrong, I hope?”

But she only sobbed, “Oh, Jeff!” and with her eyes still closed put out a helpless hand.

I had to approach and take the hand before I learned what the mystery was. I don’t know whether you have already guessed it. I hadn’t, but for all that my surprise, great as it was, passed even in the moment of Kitty’s broken whispering in my ear. I had known Louie Causton for a deep, still pool; I don’t think any revelation whatever could have added to my respect for her powers of irony and nonchalance; and yet when I say that my surprise passed it passed only to return. Good gracious! . . . I seemed to hear her carefully lackadaisical voice again as she had munched nougat: “So long since I’ve seen a man, my dear” . . . and other circumstances, unmarked at the time, flashed on me now.

A child!

“Good gracious!” I breathed again in consternation.

My next thought was of Evie.

I was kneeling by Kitty’s chair, holding her hand. I asked quickly:

“Does Evie know of this?”

"Yes."

"And does she know you're telling me?"

"Yes."

"And of course Miss Soames does not know?"

"No."

"She thinks as I thought, that it's about Archie's father Evie's so upset?"

"Yes; but perhaps she is about that too a little. I'm horribly upset, Jeff."

This last I took as a hint that the effect of this very startling intelligence on Evie was not the first thing to be considered.

"Yes, yes. . . . I see. . . ." I murmured.

We were silent, and I felt Kitty's fingers move within my grasp. They pressed mine more closely.

"Don't leave me just yet, Jeff," she begged faintly. She was genuinely prostrated.

"No, no," I said. "Let me think for a minute. . . ."

The next moment my brain was buzzing with thought.

I knew that only some such contact with plain raw actuality as this had been lacking in order to make Evie's transition from girlhood to womanhood complete. No longer now was she the fair young tree standing over its sprinkling of delicate discarded sheaths; this puff of Life's east wind had carried

away the last of them. She had heard of these things, and so in a sense knew of them; but that somebody she knew . . . that it should have come so near . . . yes, poor shocked heart, that finished it. Archie's insupportable vanities had begun her enlightenment; the menace of his father's condition had touched her with the fringe of its shadow; and now this revelation had come upon her.

Mr Merridew's illness, moreover, had a plainly seen peril for me. I knew that if anything happened Archie would immediately have enough money to marry on, and my own labours—all that I had planned and done from the first moment of my loving her to this present hour when I sat in Kitty Windus' back room holding Kitty's hand—would go for nothing. They, Evie and Archie, would probably marry, and I—I knew this in that moment for a certainty—I, from sheer yielding, should find myself married to Kitty Windus the moment I could scrape the money together.

I gave a soft groan. I don't know whether Kitty supposed my groan the commiseration for Louie Causton.

Yet what else, if I had chosen a different line, could I have done? Nothing! My shrinking heart cried, Nothing! What was I to have spoken to a young girl of marriage? An Agency clerk—with dazzling hopes! A dweller over a sordid public-

house—and a dreamer of visions! The possessor of a single suit of presentable clothes, the knees of which I was even now deteriorating past remedy—and of a heart tapestried with purple and gold, filled with an almost insensate ambition!

And I saw Evie only at all on the well-nigh insupportable footing that I was the betrothed of Kitty Windus!

Oh, if I had but had two suits of clothes, and thirty-six shillings a week instead of eighteen shillings, I think I would have cut the knot there and then and have sought Evie out that very night and asked her to marry me!

Then after a time I became more practical. Things, even the heart-breaking small things of my life, were after all slowly changing. One of these things was that my slavery at Rixon Tebb & Masters' was already promising to draw to a close. I have not yet spoken of this. Let me do so, briefly, now.

Once more I had been looking for a billet elsewhere, and this time I had excellent hopes of success. The post for which I had applied would not be vacant for six weeks yet, but I had forced a personal interview with one of my prospective employers, and had done what I had intended to do—impressed him strongly with a sense of my mental capacity. He had promised me his interest, and, unless he forgot it again (which, of course, was not im-

possible), I might have at least enough for one to live on before long. And once more my wider hopes were, I knew in my soul, not illusions. Soon there would remain only the bond that tied me to Kitty, and, with that broken, I would no longer envy even Archie Merridew that luck and weak charm of his that in the past had so often seemed more valuable than all I possessed.

But Kitty, lying back in her deck-chair, had opened her eyes again. They were full of softness and fright. She spoke.

"I wonder, Jeff—whether——" she said timidly and stopped.

"You wonder what, Kitty?" I asked gently.

"I know how strict you are—and if you say no I won't—but if I might go and see her——"

"Miss Causton?"

"Not if you don't wish it, Jeff——"

I considered.

"Has she asked you to go?"

"No—but if you wouldn't mind—very much——"

It mattered little to me, but I had to pretend to ponder deeply.

I really don't know whether I felt sorrow for Miss Causton or not. She was altogether beyond my comprehension. For all I knew my sorrow might be an impertinence. So I must seem to ponder.

"Where is she?" I asked.

"She's taken rooms in Putney."

"Alone?" I asked, with a quick glance at Kitty.

"Oh yes! . . . Until June or July, that is——"

"It is then that she expects——"

"Yes. . . . And I thought, Jeff, that perhaps next Saturday—we shall be out that way——"

We had arranged a little excursion for the following Saturday, the four of us—Evie and Archie, and Kitty and myself. We were to wander on Wimbledon Common.

"I never really knew her well, Jeff, understood her, I mean," she went on, "but after all I did see a good deal of her. It's horrible, when I remember the things she used to say. . . . And—and—you've made such a difference to me, darling—I wasn't going—to be married—before. . . . I should like to go, Jeff—just once," she begged.

"You wouldn't commit yourself to anything?"

"Oh no!"

"Does Evie want to go too?" I asked.

"No. She says she couldn't bear it. She cried half last night as it is."

"Then you'd call on your way next Saturday, and meet the three of us later?"

"Yes."

"Very well," I concluded. "You'd better go."

She threw her arms impulsively about my neck.

Then a change came over her. I think the change began with the failure of the supply of gas from the penny-in-the-slot meter. She had arranged for her little party a pink tissue-paper shade about her milky globe, an idea she had borrowed from Woburn Place; and slowly its colour faded. I had several pennies in my pocket. Quickly I felt for them.

But she moved closer to me. I was still on my knees by her deck-chair.

“Don’t bother about it—just for once, Jeff,” she murmured.

She could do it with impunity now. After what had passed our situation could hardly be commonplace, and our nearness was as little compromising as nearness ever can be. She luxuriated in her little perilous letting-go—could toy with, and yet be immune from, a danger.

Slowly the gas expired, and the firelight glowed on the blue and white check tablecloth and the disarray of tea-things upon it. On the back wall of the restaurant yard was a square of orange light which the shadow of a waiter’s head crossed from time to time. I don’t know that with some men—Mackie, for instance—her position would have been all she supposed it to be, but, poor heart, she had had little enough experience from which to surmise that. And I myself could hardly be said to

be there at all. She lay in my arms; and in whatever false sweet fancies she lay endrowsed she was not alone. I had my torturing vision too. It was neither of her nor of Louie Causton, that vision. I was trying to persuade myself that she was another than Kitty Windus.

VI

OF our visit to Wimbledon on the following Saturday I intend to say as little as may be. When you have read it you will not, I know, ask my reason.

Archie did not appear. This time he had cause enough. The wire which was handed to me at Rixon Tebb & Masters' a little before Saturday midday (Polwhele brought it to me with a look that said plainly, "What next?") announced that his father had died during the night, and he had despatched it from Victoria Station on his way down to Guildford. Instantly my heart leaped.

Kitty was going to see Miss Causton. If, this new tidings notwithstanding, Evie would still keep to the engagement, I should have an hour with her alone.

I persuaded Evie to come. At first she obstinately refused, but I had the support of Miss Angela, to whom I privately whispered the desirability of "taking her mind off it." We left Woburn Place, the two of us, called for Kitty, and sought the Putney 'bus. Kitty left us at the corner of a street off the New King's Road, and Evie and I passed on to the bridge.

That was about four o'clock, and Kitty was to rejoin us near the Windmill at an hour that would depend upon the length of her stay with Miss Caus-ton. She expected to be at the Windmill by five.

But at five there was no sign of her, nor had she appeared by half-past five. At a little before six I said to Evie, "She'll know we've gone on to the nearest place to tea, and will follow us. Let's go——"

Not far from the Windmill, on the Wimbledon side, there is a sort of small hamlet, with cottages and alleys and split-oak palings, and a refreshment house at the end of a garden. There Evie and I had tea, and there we sat after tea, waiting for Kitty. I talked of this and that, all very much away from the two subjects uppermost in her heart, and by half-past six I had given Kitty up.

"She's missed us," I said. "We may happen to run across her, but it's no good waiting here. Shall we take a turn before we go back?"

We left the refreshment-room, and walked among the gorse and birches in the direction of Queen's Mere.

It was a green and amber evening, with the shadows already deepening over Coombe Woods and the calling of homing rooks in the air. Here and there in the glades family parties still continued to play games with a ball that was quickly becom-

ing difficult to see, and lovers appeared among the coppices. The blackthorn was over, and the may hung in sprays of delicate drooping buds; and in the south-west hung the pale sickle of the new moon. Evie and I, saying little, dropped down a steep overgrown alley that led to the mere, and it was in a sandy bottom at the foot of the alley that I heard a distant rasping call. Another call followed it, and then a throaty thrilling, and then another short series of acrid and moving calls.

It was a nightingale.

By the time we had reached the motionless amber-green water it had broken into full song.

I cannot tell—hitherto I have not attempted to tell—the mystery of that eve and of the song with which it rang. I cannot speak—nor would I if I could—of the responses that eve and that song called up in my heart. It was, I think, for both of us as if that bird's voice cried aloud all that we had left unuttered during the past few hours. Even Louie Causton, even Archie's father, had their part in it. It was as if that voice spoke of the feeble and infinitely moving wonder of birth—of the impinging of that relentless shadow that closes all—and of the griefs and joys and smarts and healings again of the brief passage from that unknowing to this forgetting again. All this crowded upon me in that exquisite agony of notes. And more came, until I could hardly

endure it. There was no poignancy, no utter melting and surrender, that those importunate wellings did not give to the falling night. The unattainable greatness of Life and our own puny reachings forth for that greatness—Life's glory and the indignities of the miserable liverers of it—Life's majesty and the nosings and burrowings of the fallen heirs to that majesty—all these shortcomings were reconciled in the song; and what man would be, that for an hour he was. I fail in expressing this; Evie, I am sure, did not seek to express it; but in that loud and lost and anguished outpouring, raptures and torments were folded together as in an Amen. . . . For one moment only I shuddered; I had remembered that but for an accident I might have stood by that water, listening to that song, with Kitty Windus, but the physical convulsion passed, and the bird sang on.

I had not looked at Evie. I do not think she knew she had drawn a little closer to me. Other listeners had been attracted by the melody, but we stood in a shadow, near a rill that fell into the mere. The water was nacre; the moon's sickle in it was a thin blade of amethyst; and I thrilled unspeakably as the bird's song changed without warning to long, low, caressing notes that drew the heart out of me as the nectar-bag of a floret is drawn from a flower. I heard Evie's slow sob.

Oh, might I but have crushed out that other nectar, to transmute into honey of our own!

Suddenly Evie flung herself on my breast, sobbing and strangling. Her fingers worked at the lapel of my collar; by bending my head I could have touched her small white knuckles with my lips. I was conscious that in my efforts not to do this I bared my teeth like a dog, but I remembered in time that to snatch was to lose. It was not my bosom against which her bosom heaved—it was the nearest sentient resting-place on which she could lay it. Her unhappiness and her happiness, her dream and her disillusion, her knowledge and her already failing hopes, rushed together in her sobs. Her love of a wastrel and her love for all he was a wastrel, and that hidden and sacred nook from which Louie Causton had ruthlessly ripped the curtain—for the pure strangeness of these things her tears gushed forth. I felt the long heave of her body.

“Come, come, my dear!” I said, with an infinitude of tender encouragement, close to her ear.

“Oh—oh—oh!” she sobbed.

“Dear, dear girl!” I murmured, passing my arm about her to support her.

But at that moment I could no more have said or done more than this than I could have sued for a favour by the bier of a scarce-cold lover.

"Hush, poor child!" I whispered, patting her shoulder. "Come, let's go. Let's leave that dreadful bird."

"Just a—mi—mi—minute——" she quavered. "I—I—love it—and I can't bear it——"

Even so did I love, and yet could scarce bear to hold the tender form in my arms.

Presently we left the mere, mounted the dark lane, and began to cross the common. Her hand was now on my sleeve, and it did not leave it again. Once her fingers made an impulsive little pressure on it, which, I cried sternly to my heart, I must not regard. But God knows the war there was between the sweetness of it and my fortitude.

"Jeff," she said more quietly by-and-by, using that name for the first time. "I—I couldn't have borne it if it hadn't been for you. It was too——"

"Never mind, dear," I soothed her. "Let's walk a little more quickly—your aunt will be wondering what's become of you——"

She laughed tremulously. "Kitty will be wondering what's become of *you*," she said. Then she added timidly, "She's a lucky girl!"

"Oh? Why?" I asked.

"You're so—so——"

But she did not say what.

We turned down Putney Hill.

I said I should say little of this, and I shall say no more. I took her home, but did not go in with her, neither, though I ought to have done so, did I seek Kitty. I went home, but all that I knew of my getting there was that I found myself sitting, with my hat and coat still on, on the edge of the bed in my red-and-green-lighted apartment.

They were turning out from the public-house below when at last I rose sluggishly and began to prepare for bed.

For half the following week I was outside and beyond myself.

But exactly a week, less a day, from that Saturday on which I had held Evie in my arms there dropped a thunderbolt into my life. On that Friday evening I had gone as usual to the cashier for my wages, and he had paid me; but as I had turned away again with my eighteen shillings he had said, as if giving utterance to an afterthought, "Oh—Jeffries—we find we shall not require your services after this week. You can have your notice in writing if you would prefer it."

And he had turned to pay Sutt, the next man in the queue.

PART III
THE GARRET



I

POOB, fussy, well-meaning Kitty had done it— had done it all unwittingly. In telling her vaguely where I lived I had left the number of my house unspecified, and when a letter had come for me to the Business College on an evening when I had announced my intention of being away, she, inspired by the urgency of my affairs, had got a directory and readdressed the letter to me at Rixon Tebb & Masters'. It was a letter from the firm into whose service I hoped soon to enter, and I examined the flap of the envelope carefully when finally it did come into my hands. Polwhele (I have little doubt it was he) had steamed it open, read it and closed it again.

This time all I could get out of Gayns, whom I once more approached, was that Rixon Tebb & Masters' had no use for an employee whose mind was already elsewhere.

It was true that the sack from Rixon Tebb & Masters' was not now a matter of the first importance. That was not the thunderbolt. Scanty as my wages were I had still saved up nearly three

pounds out of them; and, as the letter that Polwhele had tampered with contained the news that I might hold myself in readiness to begin my new work a month from that date, the sum was enough to tide me over. But the letter had a postscript. This was a merely formal intimation that it was assumed that I could produce the usual references of steadiness, reliability and so forth. I myself never dreamed that I should be denied them.

I was denied them, however, by Polwhele.

"But—but," I stammered, aghast.

Polwhele referred me to my real employers, the Agency. I gave him a long and gradually lowering stare.

"Do you mean——" I began slowly.

"I mean what I say," he snapped; and as he turned away he added in a lower voice, "You ain't surprised, are you?"

And, remembering how I had seen him with his fingers in Mr Masters' waste-paper basket, I could not say I was.

Again I sought Gayns. This time the cashier flew into a passion.

"Confound you!" he cried. "You're more trouble than all the rest of them put together! What is it now? A character? Oh yes, you can have a character! I'd advise you not to show it to anybody, though! First leaving us—then coming back

—then days off—then dickering with other firms! Go to Polwhele—go to the Agency—go to hell!”

I left Rixon Tebb & Masters' without references.

Without references my new firm refused to have anything whatever to do with me.

I come now to the deepest slough of my poverty.

It was early in the month of June that I was thrown out of work, with thirty-five shillings in my pocket. The drizzling winter had given place to a glorious early summer, and the days increased in heat until they became torrid. Men walked Piccadilly at night in evening dress, with their light dust-coats thrown over their arms; and ragged urchins hailed the appearance of watercarts with whoops of joy and danced barelegged in the refreshing puddles behind them. Horses wore straw bonnets, out of which their ears stuck ludicrously up; in whole districts the water supply began to be cut off at certain hours of the day; the pitiless sun gave every street the appearance of a hard, hot snapshot; and, as the heat got on people's nerves, the cries of children at play became intolerably strident.

My corner at King's Cross was well-nigh insupportable. Why the quantity of torn paper in the gutters should redouble the moment the sun begins to glare on London I do not know, unless it be that the fried fish and ready-cooked provision businesses suddenly boom; and certainly the refuse in which

I frequently walked ankle-deep was mostly heavy with grease. Even had I been able to afford it, my "pull-up" had now become such a stove that I do not think I could have entered it. I dined, or rather supped, late at night, at one of the coffee-stalls where the electric trams now sweep round from Gray's Inn Road to St Pancras Station; and I breakfasted (my only other meal) on bread and the water I drew from my tap on the landing before it was cut off. The council didn't save much in my case by cutting the supply off. I filled every vessel I could lay my hands on early in the morning. As Miss Causton had once said, one must be clean, and Archie, whose bath I could now have passed my days in, was seldom to be found in his rooms near the Foundling Hospital now.

For three weeks I trudged the streets looking for work; and then a bit of luck befell me. The new "professor" at the college broke down under the heat; it was not desired to give up the Friday evening advertisement-writing class; and I daresay my anomalous standing at the place, something between student and pathetic high-and-dry "institution," was the cause of its being offered to me. I got five shillings for the evening, and that five shillings kept me for five days. I discovered that I need not pay my rent. The first week I missed doing this I made a shamefaced apology to my landlord, the publican,

and discovered that he was not a bad sort. It was too hot to worry about trifles, he said, and so set himself a precedent that cost him pretty dearly until, long afterwards, I saw to it that he was not the loser for having harboured me during that time.

Wherever I sought work my inability to produce a character damned me; and on the other hand I was not a Discharged Prisoner. Two or three times I was taken on casually, once as a packer at a large furniture emporium, once at a stocktaking for bankruptcy purposes, and once (I forget how I tumbled into this) I spent a whole day locked in an upper room of a town hall, counting the voting-papers in some borough or vestry election—a lucrative ten-shilling job. This was before I got, and retained for some weeks (until I had the Corps of Commissioners down on me), the post of hall porter at the offices of a sporting paper. I will tell you about that presently. You will see that I am making all the haste I can to have done with this horrible time.

Among other things, the general deterioration in my appearance had forced me to tell Kitty Windus that I was out of work. But I had made light of it, saying that, on the whole, it was rather a good thing, as I needed some sort of a spur; but I dare say Alf and Frank had said the same thing many a time. Presently my former boastings, about the great things I was shortly going to do, had committed

me to the lie that I had at last found employment. It was my week's stocktaking that I told this particular lie about, and Kitty never knew when that temporary job came to an end. Nor, poor girl, did I tell her what she had done when she had forwarded that letter to Rixon Tebb & Masters'. It would become me ill to say that she stuck to me because it was myself or nothing for her; already I had begun to dread that it would be no easy matter to get rid of her when I might find it necessary to do so: and many a time, as my despair grew upon me, sweeping all personal reluctances and physical repugnances aside, I threw pride to the winds, and ate, in her sitting-room in Percy Street, the only food I had tasted during the day—becoming an Alf or a Frank in very fact.

For—perhaps this was partly the effect of the unrelenting heat—her insipid coquetries had begun to exasperate me more and more. I became increasingly petulant when I was commanded to “tiss eentie finger” and to look into the little scalene triangles of her eyes and say that I loved her. Presently, I am afraid, I began to cause her many tears. We wrangled frequently. I was “near,” I was “close,” I did not treat her as other engaged girls were treated, I never took her anywhere except for a bus ride, or to a cheap theatre once in a blue moon.

Then one day, without warning, she brought it up

against me that I had "given her the slip" that afternoon on Wimbledon Common.

Of this I was technically so innocent, but morally so entirely guilty, that I broke out into anger, and there was a scene.

"I know some girls are younger and prettier than I am," she broke out, with unbridled temper, "but you *did* ask me to marry you after all."

"So I did," I admitted, in a tone that made her flame.

"Yes," she cried shrilly. "And not only that—I've seen you looking at Louie Causton too."

"Oh?" I said, noting with relief that her jealousy was not specially of Evie. "Well, there are one or two pleasing points about her."

"And she was the only one you danced with at the party."

"Before I asked you to marry me?"

"And me—you've never *once* taken me to a dance, though I've *seen* Rachel Levey offer you tickets."

"Perhaps you've seen me look at Miss Levey too?"

"And you never spoke to me, and sat behind the books with Louie."

"Well, there only remains one other suggestion for you to make."

And so on. It was degrading in the extreme. But I was sufficiently punished for it later, when

she lay with her head on my breast, sobbing out phrases of contrition for her vindictive temper and supplication for pardon.

All, all gone now was the hour of exaltation in which I had heard the nightingale sing and had felt my glowing girl's breast heaving against my own. I was a hungry, desperate man, living a life against which I knew I should not be able to bear up indefinitely, and already glancing into the public-house as I entered by my side door and beginning to wonder whether they were not wiser than I who made use of the anodyne of drink. Why not drink, and forget for at least an hour? And one night, meeting Mackie again, and having eaten little, I did succumb, and for the first time in my life got drunk. I got drunk at his expense. He had heard the news of Louie Causton, and wanted to talk about it. I, like a cur, let him. . . . I broke away from him at last, but not until my loosened tongue had said I know not what.

My relation with Evie during this time is difficult to define. She never quite put me back again into the place I had occupied before that Saturday when we had heard the nightingale together, but newer preoccupations overlay this relation. Archie now had money (I never knew quite how much) at his command; but he still showed no sign of putting it to the use Miss Angela, if not I, had expected—that

of entering into a formal engagement with Evie. Miss Angela found excuses for this out of her own imagination—that his father had only lately died, and so on; but I could have set her right even then. I knew how things were drifting. From the little I remembered of my talk with Mackie, Archie had found in his coming into money quite another opportunity. What might have facilitated his marriage with Evie actually delayed it. He was getting rid of his money in Leicester Square again.

So Evie's name was associated with his, and yet there was no plighting between them, and Evie swayed, now happy but with a fear, now despairing, but not hopelessly so. There was no trouble she could have brought openly to me even had she wished, but nevertheless she often turned to me significantly full of silence. She, Kitty and I often walked homewards together through the sweltering streets, and when Evie had left us Kitty would speak her mind freely about Archie Merridew.

“He's one of the Jewness Dorey now!” she exclaimed one evening, taking the phrase, I don't doubt, from one of her “better class” novels. “And it's no good saying it's got nothing to do with us! I think *you* ought to give him a talking-to!”

This was in the typewriting-room of the college, within ten minutes of the close of an advertisement-writing evening.

"What can I say to him?" I asked. "It's no business of mine." She little knew how much I had made it my business.

"Oh, that's just like a man!" she said impatiently, all aglow with the *esprit de sexe*. "The poor child's moping and fretting, and you say it's no business of yours! Of course it's the business of all her friends!"

"Of all her women friends, maybe," I answered. "Well, if that's so, why don't you and Miss Angela have a talk about it?"

"As if we hadn't—twenty!" she cried. "You and your bright ideas. It isn't fair—it *isn't* fair to Evie!"

"But what is it you hope for?" I asked.

She stared. "Why, that he'll marry her, of course!"

"Quite so. But I don't mean that. I mean, do you and Miss Angela think you can bring any pressure to bear?"

"Yes, I do—young idiot!" she broke out. "He ought to be ashamed of himself!"

And I didn't doubt that a certain amount of pressure might be brought to bear. If it was made less trouble for Archie to marry than not to marry, he would probably marry. He had not manhood enough, if it was clearly shown that marriage was expected of him, to hold out. And I knew how

those marriages turned out. . . . I meditated.

"But," I objected, "why meddle? You know what a marriage of that kind would be! You see what he is anyway!"

But here I had touched Kitty's limitation. For her, as for her novels, marriage was the end of the story. If joybells closed it nothing after that mattered, and the look she gave me was a personal confirmation.

"But," she went on presently, "you could help, Jeff. We women can't talk to him—though he's not getting very many smiles from *me* just now!"

I smiled. "You're an unscrupulous crew," I remarked.

"Will you see him?"

"Well—I won't say I won't."

"But *will* you?"

"Perhaps—if I see a fitting opportunity."

"A fitting. Look!" Her voice dropped. Evie had just come into the typewriting-room on her way to wash her hands before leaving. "I'll tell you what," Kitty said quickly; "you go along with her now. See if it isn't as I say. Then tell me whether you won't give that little idiot a dressing-down at once."

She had quite forgotten that twinge of jealousy that had been the cause of our recent scene. If she hadn't, the more honour to her sense of sex com-

radeship. It was about this time that I was beginning quite frequently to forget that our relation was that of lovers, and as long as I could forget that, she had pathetic little magnanimities that I even admired.

“All right, if you wish it,” I said.

So for once Evie’s society was absolutely thrust upon me.

That night she was all that Kitty had said—plunged in despondency. She was, of course, “in love with” Archie, but that after all is only a generic expression. Even love comes down to cases, and I think that in her case, even then, she was wondering whether, had things happened a little differently, she might not have been equally “in love” with somebody else. Of that I myself had never a doubt. With Archie’s money, or even a decent job, I would have flouted the whole world in my triumphant security that I could make her mine. And I should do so yet. Though for the present my power might go a-begging, I vowed that it should yet be taken and richly paid for. The dark and solid houses were less solid than that something I knew to be within myself, that makes and unmakes houses and streets and towns and lands. . . . But gently, gently; I was not out of the mire yet; by-and-by would be time enough for these boastings;

things must go on as they were for a little while longer.

So though I did not speak a word to her that night that bore directly on the case as Kitty understood it, I did more. I did—I know this now—make her feel that, glooms and delights apart, she had in me an affectionate friend to whom she would not come with troubles in vain. I have been told, and am inclined to believe it, that I have this power with women.

And her eyes were soft with friendship as I left her.

“Good night, Jeff,” she said fondly, as I took her hand. “I do like being with you sometimes.”

And that night, as I lay half suffocated in the room I did not even pay rent for, the words rang like a chime in my head until the morning noises marked the beginning of another torrid day.

The commissionaire’s job I spoke of I got in an odd way. I got it through the combination of my unusual size with unusual strength. I was walking along Fleet Street that day when a horse fell, and I, with others, helped to raise it again. When we had finished, a man at my elbow spoke both casually and penetratingly.

“That was as good as anything I’ve seen for weeks,” he said. “Have you had much practice in

holding a whole horse up while the others fasten the buckles?"

I laughed. I had certainly had the heavy end of the job, but "Not quite that," I said.

He gave me a scrutinising look. "Out o' work?" it seemed to say; but he did not speak the words.

"Here, come and have a drink," he said.

His name was Pettinger. He was a sporting journalist, and so a judge of "form" and "condition." I was not in the best of either, but I must have struck him as having "the makings" of I don't quite know what. He gave me a drink, which I didn't want, and a plate of sandwiches, which I did want rather badly; and he also gave me, as I say, this commissionaire's job. Pettinger is a friend of mine to this day; and since he is a simple and lovable animal of a fellow (he fully concurs in this description of himself) he is the only man I can bear to speak much to about that time when, clad in a sky-blue uniform, I kept the door of his newspaper office, touching my cap to proprietors, and being jocularly prodded by sportsmen and journalists, as if I had been an ox at Smithfield Show.

II

IT was about this time that Archie Merridew's light was once more beginning to show regularly, evening after evening, over the leads of his top floor near the Foundling Hospital. This was after a period of months during which his abode had been in complete darkness. But as his visits to the college had become infrequent, and as I did not know what he might be up to, I had kept away.

When, some little after my commission from Kitty, I did look him up again, it was by no means that I might deliver Kitty's message. I went, rather, as a matter of attention to detail. There were certain things I could not afford not to know, and, more important, there were certain appearances I could not afford not to keep up. Nevertheless I did not dream with what consequences my visit of that evening would presently be fraught.

I was in a state of great nervous irritability before I went. The weather still continued almost insupportably hot, and to my other discomforts had been added a new perturbation that worked on me none the less that in all probability it was quite groundless. The evening papers had started a scare

about "low-flash oil"; my red and green room was little cooler than a furnace; and I had lately begun to glance at my cheap lamp from time to time as if it had been a bomb. I mention this merely as an indication of the state to which I was becoming reduced. I thought of that lamp, I remember, as I walked from the college to Archie's rooms that night and half hoped in my peevishness that the thing had exploded in my absence.

It was only ten o'clock, but Archie was already in bed. He wore blue silk pyjamas and on a small table by the side of his bed stood a medicine bottle and a siphon; but when I asked him whether he was ill that he had need of these last he made light of them. It was this beastly weather, he said, and perhaps the beastly weather also accounted for his drinking the milk that Jane presently brought up in a sealed bottle. When Jane had gone, Archie, with an attempt at his old disarming impertinence, turned to me and said, "Well—how's the blue uniform, Jeff?"

Ah! He knew of that!

"Didn't think I'd heard, did you?" he grinned. "Well, I only did hear yesterday. Nothing to be ashamed of, old chap. I know one of your fellows, you know——"

I too knew the sub-editor whose name he mentioned. He was something of a bird of the night

too. 'Already the fact that Archie knew of my occupation had set me swiftly revolving the new dispositions I should certainly have to make in my relation to Kitty and Evie.

"Ah, yes," I said. "I shouldn't attempt to drink with the sub-editor of a sporting paper if I were you. You've been trying, I expect," I added, looking suspiciously at him. He seemed drawn and ill. He never had any stamina.

"Sha'n't tell tales out of school," he replied, with another weak attempt at his old facetiousness. "Well, how's the fair Kitty?"

Ill as he was, I could have boxed his ears for the tone of it, but I answered his question, and he grinned again.

"Rare good sort," he said appreciatively. "Give us a splash of that soda, and pass those cigarettes, Jeff. . . ." Then, lighting a cigarette, "Look here, you old scoundrel," he said, "I've got a crow to pluck with you! Guess what it is?"

I could not.

"Well," he leered. "I saw Mackie the other night."

You will remember what had happened the last time I myself had seen Mackie.

"So there!" he triumphed, after some recital or other that had for its point my single fit of intoxica-

tion. "Now what about it, you old humbug?" he demanded.

I knew I must keep my face and smile. I did not know why I must do these things, but I did them, looking at him and noticing again how sallow and changed he was. Then I looked about the room, mentally commenting on the evidences of the patrimony that had done him so little good—his new dressing-gown, his silver-topped bottles, and a new travelling-case, these things thrown anyhow among his older belongings. One of the newer objects I held in my hand; it was the gold cigarette case I had passed him; and I gazed smiling at it as he went on.

"Yes," he told me, with humorous accusation; "Mackie told me all about it—ha ha ha! What price the old puritan Jeff now? Eh? Sad dog, sad dog!"

I replied, quite calmly, that the dissipations of commissionaires were limited by their circumstances.

"And what the devil are you doing being a commissionaire?" he demanded. "I'll tell you what it was, Jeff," he continued familiarly, "that failure in Method seems to me to have broken you all up. What the dickens made you fail?"

I was conscious of an interior stirring of hate. What, indeed, had made me fail!

"Oh, over-confidence, I suppose," I answered lightly.

And he continued to talk.

At last I rose and said good-night. He raised himself on one elbow in order to shake hands.

"Come in again and see a chap soon," he said. "It's hellish slow up here all alone."

I was already at the door, but I turned abruptly.

"What do you mean?" I said. "Do you mean you're laid up? You said you weren't."

But he only gave a confused little laugh. "Eh? Laid up? Of course not! Can't a chap turn in early once in a while?"

"Once in a while'? . . . But you said——"

"That you might come in and see me? Well, do. No harm in that, is there? Say I'm going slow for a bit, that's all," he added.

I agreed with him that to "go slow" for a bit was a course he might with advantage have adopted some time ago, and, though considerably puzzled, I turned slowly away.

My lamp, I discovered when I reached my dwelling again, had not exploded in my absence; but I did not light it. This was not, of course, through any actual fear; it was merely part of my general nervous condition. I remember, as still further explaining that condition, that I had passed a Board School that day as the children had poured out for their morning recess of a quarter of an hour; I have

said how more than commonly strident the heat seemed to make all noises; and at the sudden outburst of the children I had broken into a copious flood of perspiration. I was not much steadier now. Pushing the lamp aside I flung up my window as high as it would go, drew out my old string-mended chair, and, sitting down, began to stare at the "*Sarcey's Fluid*" advertisement across the way.

The rippling of its incandescents had a trick that always fascinated and irritated me intensely. Before the last letter of the first word was an apostrophe, but its single bright spot always appeared out of its proper order. S—A—R—, and so on, the thing ran, but the whole legend was complete before that apostrophe started into its place. I used sometimes to watch as if I hoped the whole mechanism might suddenly alter, but, of course, it never did. I began to watch it again that night, while my ceiling and the wall above my bed became red and green, red and green, red and green. . . .

I am afraid that what I am now about to say I shall have to ask you to take on trust. I have no evidence to offer of a phenomenon that, I am told, is shared by madness and genius alike. Nor will I trouble you either with any talk of prevision or of inner certitude, nor with the gradually deepening brooding that led up to this phenomenon—the brood-

ing over the countless slights and slurs and rubs I had suffered from Archie Merridew's reckless and ignorant tongue ever since I have known him—my appearance, my private affairs, the side-splitting joke of Jeffries being in love. I will pass straight to the sudden and complete illumination that, as I sat there, so irradiated my intelligence that I wondered why it had come to me now, an hour later, and not then, the moment I had seen him lying at that extraordinarily early hour in bed.

It came, this flash of illumination, in exactly the same manner as the changing of the electrograph before my eyes—and, as you will see in a moment, with the same bloody apostrophe. And with its coming my room was not more suffused with the crimson glare than my mind suddenly was with the same morbid and flaming and dangerous hue.

I had suddenly realised what was really the matter with Archie.

Let me now tell you the kind of man I have sometimes, though possibly mistakenly, supposed myself to be.

He has aspired, that man, I have sometimes supposed myself to be, to the stars; but his feet have also known the burning bottom of the pit. His heart has been lifted up until sometimes, through eyes drowned with tears, he has had his poor and fragmentary glimpse of a larger Fatherhood than

earth knows; but he has also exchanged intelligence with the devil. His heart has flowered with loves and charities; but that same heart has also been a rock with a toad in it. He was born in heaven, but has lodged in hell. So in him, according as he has been used, have opposites met.

And yet, as I say, I may be wrong in supposing that I am this man.

Yet the man who, in my red and green room that night, leaped up from his chair, and with a bursting, ringing cry shook his hand on high, was not the James Herbert Jeffries who now writes this feverish shorthand. He who writes the shorthand was not the same James Herbert Jeffries who stood, with those violent dyes flooding his face, vowing that if that sick young buyer of infected merchandise dreamed for one instant of doing that which it was sought to make him do, and which apparently he was ready to do, he should pay for it with the last thing he had to give. That James Herbert Jeffries was plunged in that hour into a place of stench and infernal brightness that God forbid was ever his destined abode.

I cried aloud, shaking my fist up at my cracked and blackened ceiling:

*“Though Christ died for man in vain . . .
let him but think of it . . . let him . . .
let him . . . and I . . .”*

After that I passed into a curious state of mind. You have heard how I make, when I can, anger serviceable to me, but here was an anger past my bringing into control. Yet, as ordinarily I plan calmly, so was I calm up to a certain point now. The result of these two things was that my brain worked like a worn and cranky machine, sometimes doing more than it ought, sometimes less; sometimes jerking startlingly ahead, sometimes refusing to work at all. And as there was thus no continuity in my thought, and as my recollections are curiously associated with that changing red and green that now for the first time seems to me to have run through my story like a fateful burden of jealousy and blood, I will set down such isolated reflections as rise of themselves out of the jumble of my mind.

Crime (I realise that the word leaps with some suddenness into these pages) has suffered more at the hands of criminals than it has at the hands of justice. There are few perfect crimes. Most of them are accidental, the mere explosion of momentary passion. And that is well, for the world wants few masterpieces in that sort. I have not read De Quincey's essay on the subject, nor ever shall now; but if crime is to be considered as an artistic medium, it is the only medium in which bungling is better worth to the world than competence. Other arts one

prefers to see superlatively practised or not at all; but it is only of the bungled crime that man can endure to think.

The ordinary criminal begins at the wrong end. Dull fellow that he is he does not recognise that his first task must be the creation of an attitude of mind. Or if a glimmering of this does cross his inflamed consciousness, he thinks that it is the attitude of his own mind that is of the first consequence. That is why he suffers either the retribution of justice or the visitings of his own conscience. In either of these cases his act is unsuccessfully committed. He pays in common with his victim.

It is not the injured man who knows the full quality of hate. It is the one who injures. The injurer has no refuge from his own transgression; he has him whom he has injured constantly upon his mind—perhaps upon his soul. Another is the lord of his peace of mind. Thus it is peculiarly the wronged man's part to pardon, but when the wronged man would not pardon, but would avenge for another's sake?

Could Archie be given a mind more sensitive than a stone? Could his weak and spongy nature be hardened to a point of view? Could such an

attitude be created in him that what otherwise would have been an assault would take on the stern justice of a punishment? Can any dull or egotistical mind be either punished or rewarded? Ultimately, can the God who created it do anything save quench it again? Wickedness may be vanquished at the last, but Ignorance——? And Conceit——?

But bah! Probably he was not even thinking of it. Perhaps he was even now seeking a way out. Well, I would help him. Ten words to him in private. . . . Faugh!

So *that* was it. . . . And the world allows it! Could he be proved to be merely insane at the time of his marriage the world would not allow it; a mental insufficiency beyond his control would be a bar; but this other, that he had deliberately sought, would be allowed. And Evie . . .

That bloody apostrophe again! . . .

The criminal forgets too much in the moment of action. It is a sort of stage fright. Rehearsed perfectly, however. . . . Not that the thing is not admittedly difficult. A button, a fingerprint, a drop of blood, the resources of the laboratory, the microscope, the spectroscope—oh yes, it cannot be said that there is not a deal to watch. And a mem-

ory, a chance association years afterwards, an attack of debility rendering the eyes subject to deceits—any one of these things may at any moment throw him into the hands of the law as a fate more merciful than that which he has not been clever enough to forestall within himself. Yes, there is much to consider; but then, as all the world knows, masterpieces of crime or what not, are difficult of accomplishment.

Ten words, then, on the morrow, and he would never dare . . .

But bah! I was not even sure! He *could* not be contemplating it, and I was vile to think it. . . . Still, prudence. I must make sure. Till then, nothing—not even these thoughts that ticked as if out of a tape-machine from my brain. Tomorrow . . .

Yet, ah! I was sure for all that!

This red and green, this red and green!

These are such fragments of it all as I can remember. I don't know how long they occupied me. I had begun to trace with my fingers little patterns on the deal top of my table, patterns that sometimes had a meaning for me, sometimes not,

but that always had a meaning for Archie Merridew
if he thought . . . if he as much as thought

. . .
Then the red and green advertisement was switched
off suddenly. Only a rhomb of dim gaslight on my
ceiling remained. . . .

But I still sat in the darkness, my brain taking
those backward and forward jerks, and my lips
muttering, though without sound, that if he dreamed
. . . if he as much as dreamed . . .

III

IT was a "record" even for myself to get the sack twice in one week, but that now befell me. They gave me no notice at the newspaper office, but they were decent, and I had a fortnight's wages in lieu of it. Pettinger especially showed himself my friend.

"It's rough on you," he said, "but I really don't see that anybody's to blame. . . . Look here, I'll tell you what we'll do. Go down to my place at Bedford; I'll telephone them you're coming; and you can do what there is to do in my garden for a week or two until something turns up. You won't mind working under the old chap I've got there? Right. Off you go. You've got your money, haven't you?"

"I shall have to come up for Friday evening; I've a class," I said.

"Well, have a change till then. You look as if you need it. Catch the twelve-fifty, and I'll telephone them now."

So I took off my sky-blue uniform and wondered, as I folded it neatly and laid it aside, where they were going to find the next man it would fit.

This was at half-past ten in the morning, so that I had some hours to spare. Ten minutes, if I could catch him, would suffice for all I had to say to Archie Merridew, and, as he was not an early riser, and had told me that he was not spending his days in bed, I hoped to find him before he went out. But as the Business College lay on the way I determined to call there first. I walked up Chancery Lane into Holborn.

But he had not arrived at the college when I got there, and I did not wait for him. I had walked home with him often enough to know his unvarying route, and I set off for his place half expecting to meet him on the way. But I did not meet him, so I knocked at the brass knocker of his ivy-green door.

Jane told me he had only that moment gone out.

"To the college?" I asked.

Jane thought so, but was not sure.

"If I don't see him I'll call again," I said.

"Tell him, will you?"

I returned to the Business College, and there waited, talking to Kitty, who had just arrived.

Kitty seemed extremely embarrassed that morning, and of course I guessed the reason. She had heard of the sky-blue uniform, doubtless through Archie. (For two nights I had not seen her.) I was none the less sure of this that she did not mention the circumstance directly; nor did she comment on my

being at liberty at that unusual hour of the morning. Presently she said:

"I don't think he'll come this morning now. He may this afternoon."

"I can't wait till the afternoon," I said, glancing at the little clock on the mantelpiece of the type-writing-room—the little clock that had given the "Ting" that had startled me so on the day of the examination in Method.

"Is it anything I can tell him?"

That, of course, was quite out of the question. "I'll see if he's back home yet," I replied.

Then Kitty's uneasiness and curiosity got the better of her delicacy about the sky-blue uniform. She looked fixedly at her thin wrists and her fingers gave little touches to the lace about them as she spoke.

"Jeff," she said timorously, "I don't know whether you know what—what they're saying about you—I'm sure it's a hideous lie, but—but it's upset me frightfully——" She stopped abruptly, and seemed even then to wish she had not spoken.

"You seem very easily upset nowadays," I said shortly, quite ready to quarrel if needs be.

But she ignored my tone. "You know they're saying—everybody's saying—all the people here, I mean."

"What?" I demanded.

But her courage failed her. She stopped the fid-

dling at her wrists, and, giving me a long look said, "You know I love you, Jeff, whatever happens——"

It was what I had begun to fear—that there would be no shaking her off. She was far, far too faithful.

"I see," I said slowly. "I know what you mean. . . . Well, it was quite true. I *was* a commissioner—until an hour ago. They've sacked me. . . . I suppose Archie told you?"

"Girl-faced little wretch! But, Jeff——"

I took her up. "Well, it's that that I want to see him about. But as regards you and me—if you want it to make a difference——"

It was a plain offer to release her, but I don't think she understood it as that. Indeed, her manner puzzled me entirely. It was eager, shrinking, wistful and apprehensive all at once, and she appeared to be trying to shake off something—something preposterous. Well, that sky-blue uniform had been preposterous enough.

"It shall make a difference—if you wish," I offered again proudly.

"No," she murmured, apparently understanding this time, and busy with her lace again.

Then I entered into I know not what fantastic explanation of the curious fact that a man with the world in his grasp should have chosen to touch his cap to editors and proprietors. She tried to look

as if she believed me, but it was plain that she didn't in the least. Once or twice she tried to interrupt me, but my patience was quickly running out.

"So you see how it was," I said at last, dropping my voice as Weston, the secretary-bird passed. "It was no business of his, and I want to know what he's got to say about it. You can tell him so if you like."

Again that inexplicable look of timorousness came into her small eyes.

"You *mean* the commissionaire's job, of course?" she said.

"I mean the commissionaire's job," I replied.

That, I thought with satisfaction, would cover my real reason for wishing to see Archie as well as anything else.

Weston passed again, and gave me a look. That look struck me. It was just such a look as a policeman might give a loiterer whom he suspects, yet against whom he has no charge; and I felt my colour mount a little. That tattling little animal! Little he cared, as long as he had his joke, that my five shillings was put in jeopardy. For a business college that styles itself advertisement writer "professor" naturally doesn't want commissionaires on its staff, and I saw my second dismissal looming ahead.

Then, with a new and cautious idea in my head, I turned to Kitty again.

"On second thoughts," I said, "*don't* say anything to Archie about my wanting an explanation. I'll settle with him. After all, it was bound to come sooner or later. It doesn't much matter. I'll see to it. . . . Well, I'm off. Good-bye, dear. I don't think I shall be able to see you again till Friday."

And I left her, nodded to Weston, and passed out.

I daresay you guess what my new and cautious idea was. I had something of the last privacy to say to Archie; it was just as well that I should have the cloak of comparatively trivial personal remonstrance to cover it; but this was only part of it. The truth was that my brain had suddenly taken another of those startling leaps forward. In some conceivable last event (I was not planning one, you understand; it was merely that my mind was working somewhere ahead, independently and beyond my control) it might be necessary that I should have *no* personal quarrel with him. In such an event none must suppose that our relation had been other than amicable. Yet I should be overdoing this (purely anticipatory) prudence to pass over the episode of the sky-blue uniform entirely. The thing was, or might become, a matter of nicely measured proportions. Already I was making the slight private affront serve my turn; presently I might want to make the pardon of that affront serve my turn also.

This kind of thing is what I mean by the creation of an attitude of mind and "attention to detail."

I made one more attempt to find Archie as I walked to St Pancras, but he was still not at home. Then I had to run for my train.

I worked in Pettinger's garden that week, carrying water, wheeling barrows, and filling baskets with fruit as I passed between the canes. Pettinger was away for two nights, but on the third evening he came up to me as I was pushing a heavy roller over the lawn and began to talk. I think he began for the sake of a pleasant word or two, but something I said seemed to engage his interest, an hour or more passed, and then, as the phlox and canterbury bells began to glimmer in the twilight, he suddenly said, "Leave this and come inside—we can talk comfortably there."

We went in. I shall never forget that night. It was made memorable by the fact that master and gardener talked till two o'clock in the morning.

"Well, Jeffries," he said at last, with a sleepy yawn, "you're an extraordinary chap. I'm afraid you've made rather a lot of work for me this last hour or two."

"How so?" I asked.

"Well, I was going to try to get you a job something like your last, but you're a difficult man to find a job for. I won't ask you whether you know.

you're extraordinary; of course you know you are; and I'm going, if I can, to give you a chance—a real chance—not like that other—those cut-throats—what's their name."

I had told him about Rixon Tebb & Masters' and the rest of it.

"I've a bit of a pull here and there," he went on sleepily. "There's the 'Freight and Ballast Company'—I know a couple of their men—but we'll talk about that in the morning. I'm off to bed. Hope they've made you comfortable?"

It does not come within the scope of my present tale to speak of my later rapid rise; but I may say now that I owed my chance to Pettinger and to the berth he got me, with the coming of winter, in the offices of the "F. B. C."

I remained in his house all that week; then, on the Friday evening, I took a return ticket to town in order to attend my class.

I had not been half-an-hour in the college that evening before I was aware that something had happened. Archie Merridew was not there, but Evie was, and so was Kitty Windus. I went through my work as usual, and then, at half-past nine, sought Kitty. It was she who told me the news.

"You've not heard, have you?" she asked, with a glance towards the senior students' room, through which Evie had just passed. Again she was, in some

manner I could not understand, eager, reserved, apprehensive and fidgety all at once.

"Heard what?" I asked.

"About Evie. It's come off. She and Archie are properly engaged."

From that moment dated a division of me into two separate men, of which I shall have more to say presently.

"Oh?" I replied, with complete calm. "That's good news indeed! Wait here a minute—I'll speak to her—don't go, for I want to see you."

I met Evie returning with her towel and celluloid box of soap. She too was excited, so excited that she would have passed me, but I thought I understood that. I stopped her.

"Well, Evie?" I said, smiling.

She waited, painfully full, I couldn't help thinking, of emotion.

"It was you who congratulated me before," I said.

"It's my turn now, I hear."

She looked at me and away again, and again at me and away.

"Thank you, Mr Jeffries," she said, beginning to make little pointings of her foot this way and that on the floor.

I spoke very gently. "Jeff—or Mr Jeffries if you prefer it—wishes you nothing but happiness, Evie," I said.

"Oh, thank you," she said, with increasing per-

turbation, "thank you very much indeed—thank you really—Jeff."

It was odd in the extreme. She gave me the reluctant "Jeff," and somehow I wished she hadn't, it came with such difficulty. Something, I was convinced, lay behind it. I did not expect her in the circumstances to be quite collected, but her manner was—I don't know how else to describe it—almost that of a child who has pleaded with authority for permission to bestow one final charity on an undesirable associate. . . . What! I thought, she also ashamed to know a commissioner!

"When are you going to be married?" I asked, after an awkward pause.

"Quite soon," she replied, equally awkward. "As soon as I can get my things ready." She stopped.

"I suppose Archie's coming here for you—to-night, I mean?"

"No—he's got a man to see—a friend—in Store Street, I think."

"Then may I walk along with you?"

She seemed to have feared the question. "Oh," she said quickly, "if you don't mind—I've something awfully private to say to Kitty—she and I have arranged to go on together."

("Not wanted," I said to myself.) Aloud, "Well, I hope you'll be happy, Evie," I added.

"Thank you," she said again, lifting curiously, appealing eyes for a moment.

I turned abruptly from her, and sought Kitty, who was still waiting. I had picked up a sudden suspicion, and wished to confirm it.

"Ready?" I said, in a tone as matter of fact as I could assume.

Again she began to flutter. I couldn't understand what had come over the whole college.

"I'm sorry, Jeff," she began, with rapid effusiveness. "If I'd only known you wanted—but I've got to go somewhere."

I knew that, Evie had just told me.

"Woburn Place, you mean?"

"No, dear—somewhere else—quite different."

"Really?" I said, incredulously smiling and frowning both at once.

"Of course! How funny you are!"

I looked searchingly down into her eyes.

"I think *you're* funny," I said slowly.

"You really must excuse me, Jeff—if you'd only let me know."

But I had had enough of this. Gently but irresistibly I took her arm.

"Come along, Kitty," I said quietly. "I particularly want to talk to you."

She quailed, but still hung back.

"Very well," I said. "Will you tell me where you're going?"

She was obstinately silent.

"You're going with Evie, of course?"

I knew by the little rush with which she spoke that she was telling the truth and was relieved to be able to do so. "Oh no!" she said. "I'm going quite alone, quite alone—honour, Jeff!"

"Evie's not going with you—to Store Street or wherever it is?"

She stiffened. "I don't know what you mean by Store Street, and I think you've got Evie on the brain," she said.

What the devil ailed them all?

And why had Evie said she was going with Kitty?

As abruptly as I turned away from the one I now turned away from the other.

The next moment: "Er—Jeffries!" I heard.

It was Weston with my five shillings. I turned.

"Oh, Jeffries! I'm sorry to say—glad in one sense of course—that Professor Hitchcock will be taking the class again next Friday. The college wishes—wishes to thank you for stopping the gap as you have done. It's been most obliging of you."

I said something—I was glad Hitchcock was better, I said.

"Yes—er—he's quite well again now—quite on his feet again," said the secretary-bird. "And—er—Jeffries—I'm exceedingly sorry, but I've a rather unpleasant duty to perform."

I was utterly mystified. "What is it now?" I demanded almost roughly.

"It's that the Board is of opinion—has come to the conclusion—that consisting as we do of younger students than yourself—it would be of advantage—perhaps of advantage to you too if—if——"

I helped him out. "If I don't come again?"

"I wished to break it gently to you—but that is the substance of it," he stammered.

Curious. . . .

"Thank you, Weston," I said. "I quite understand. Will you please tell them that I didn't ask for any explanation?"

Exceedingly curious. . . .

"Yes, yes, yes," he murmured sympathetically.

"Now," I said to myself some minutes later, as I descended the stairs, "it only requires Miss Angela to turn me down."

I walked to Woburn Place, and there asked a Swiss boy if I might see Miss Angela. Archie's friend Mr Shoto passed me as I waited in the hall, but I did not speak to him. After some minutes the Swiss boy returned. His answer was what I expected. Miss Soames had a nervous headache, and asked to be excused from seeing me.

And all, I thought with amazement as I turned away, because for a week or two I had worn a sky-blue uniform!

IV

THAT division of me into two men that I have said dated from the time when Kitty told me of Evie's engagement to Archie Merridew was, in a sense, no new thing. I had felt it in some measure before, when I had deliberately avoided Archie that I might give my anger its head and had smiled in his face again when the fit had worked itself out. I had striven, too, to stand between him and the black rages he and my general circumstances had provoked.

But no sooner had the words, that Evie was now definitely engaged, come from Kitty's lips than I knew this division to be complete and irrevocable. Even did he withdraw in time he had still contemplated it; and in my soul I did not now believe he would withdraw. "The Devil was sick, the Devil a Saint would be." And I knew at last who his friend in Store Street was. A name, seen on a medicine bottle in his room, had leaped into my memory. His "friend" was some obscure practitioner of a doctor.

So I now became as the Giant in the story, who was so exquisitely cloven from head to middle by

the magic blade that he did not feel the wound that was his death. "Cut, then!" he laughed. "Shake yourself," he was told. And he fell in twain.

A shake, and I too should fall in twain.

I will now tell you how I got that shake.

Thinking over my sudden ostracism in Pettinger's house that night I only became more and more mystified. That the Business College should no longer require me I could understand—for snobbery plays a terrible part in business. That Kitty had reproached me for my lack of trust in her about my commissionaire's post was also easily to be accounted for. Miss Angela might in truth have had a headache and have begged to be excused from receiving me. But that Evie should turn against me was inexplicable. It contradicted every tradition of her upbringing. My being forced into a humble, but not ignoble, occupation could never have made this difference in her. If anything in the whole business could be taken as a certainty, that could. And so the more I thought about it the more sure I became that, though I myself might conceal my real reason for wishing to see Archie Merridew by giving out that I merely wanted to remonstrate with him about his chattering, others were using that very giving-out as a screen for something I was in total ignorance of. Kitty's timorousness returned to me; I believed now that she had actually been trying to

tell me something else, whatever it was; and so I tossed and turned on my pillow, vainly racking my brain.

I finally decided to have it out with both Kitty and Archie on the morrow.

I went up to town the next morning, and walked straight to the Business College. I did not wish, after what I had been told the night before, to go up, so I found an office boy on one of the lower floors and sent him up with word that somebody would like to see Miss Windus. Then I waited, just inside the Holburn entrance.

In a few minutes she came down, hatted and gloved. Her face looked old; her eyes were dull, and almost closed—with weeping, I was instantly sure; and she touched my sleeve almost as if she feared I might shake her hand off again.

“I thought it would be you,” she said, in a dull voice. “Let’s have a walk. I’ve something to say.”

We walked without speaking along Holborn, and presently turned into the little courtyard of Staple’s Inn. We sat down on the bench that surrounds the tree in the middle.

She had broken into speech almost before we sat down. It was as if she feared that if she did not get it out at once she would not speak at all. She was intensely agitated.

"Jeff," she said, "I've wronged you—cruelly and basely."

I did not smile at the melodramatic little phrase. I had not the ghost of an idea what she meant, but that something was impending I was already aware.

"I saw you didn't know last night," she went on. "This morning?"

It was a question. "I'm no wiser this morning," I said.

"You asked me where I was going last night."

"I did."

"Can you guess why when—when I tell you it was to Louie Causton's?"

I shook my head.

"Even then I cannot guess."

Then she began to tremble. She grasped the edge of the seat with her hand so that I should not see how she shook.

"Jeff," she said, in a low voice, "if you never want to see me again—I can't blame you if you don't—not after this."

I waited.

"Not that I shouldn't always, always love you. It will be my punishment—I shall have to bear it."

Still I waited.

"Yesterday it was you who offered it—now it's me—it will serve me right."

I thought she would never go on. "You mean our engagement, of course?" I said.

"Yes," she gulped.

"Why?" I asked suddenly.

"Because—because of what I've been beast enough to believe of you, Jeff."

"And that is——"

As I again waited for her to speak I looked round the courtyard. A clerk was at work in a first-floor window, and he caught my eye and looked away again. In another window an office boy stood with a pen in his mouth, turning the pages of a ledger. Then, after a while, and very disjointedly, Kitty went on:

"They said you said it yourself, and I—at first I didn't—but then I believed it. I know I was beastly about it once before—then we quarrelled—but I didn't mean what I said then—believe me, I didn't. . . . And," she went on, "I didn't know who—who—it was. . . . She never told me—you know what I mean. . . . I hate myself—now. I suppose I'm jealous—the green-eyed monster, Jeff—but they did say it—said you'd as much as said so yourself—and——"

I was beginning to get impatient with her rambling.

I said "And what?" but I don't think she heard me.

"So that's why I went to Louie herself—to ask her—right out——"

All at once I felt it coming.

"Well?"

But suddenly she buried her face in her hands, and her thin shoulders shook. 'Again I saw the clerk watching. . . .

"Oh!" she moaned. "Can you ever, *ever* forgive me?"

"For——"

"For ever thinking that you and Louie—that you and Louie——"

She lifted her piteous eyes to mine.

I think it was then that the Giant shook himself and fell in twain. He has been more or less roughly cobbled together since, and the halves rub on somehow side by side, but to this day the one man in me faints for the great sweet things of Life, while the other has the devil ever at his elbow.

The whole courtyard had swung round; I actually seemed, with my physical eye, to see it for some moments out of the vertical. Then it righted again, and the whole mystery of the previous evening dissolved in light.

"You and Louie—you and Louie——"

Yet again the courtyard seemed to lean and slide

sideways for a moment; then I flung a blazing searchlight back across my memory.

Louie Causton's super-subtle mask. "So long since I saw a man, my dear—the Baboon?—oh, I should know which way to turn *then!*"

My half-admissions to Archie when he had tried with such persistency to get out of me who it was I was in love with.

Her failure to return to the college, that alone had thrown me into Kitty's arms rather than into her own.

That something, God knows what, that I might have said to Mackie when, after having eaten nothing, I had drunk with him.

Kitty's own desperate possessiveness and jealousy.

All these things fell into place as the coloured granules fall when the kaleidoscope is given a turn. I had been accused of being Miss Causton's lover!

As I remain that divided Giant henceforward until the end of my tale, I will divide my name also, and tell you of a colloquy that began within me between these two men—the honest, human, enraged Jeffries, and that other, whom I will call James Herbert, at whose elbow stood the devil.

"Ah!" choked Jeffries, flaming red.

"Quietly, quietly!" whispered his interlocutor.

"That's Merridew again!" choked the other.

“ Quietly—keep your face—there’s a clerk in that window watching you!”

“ The whole world may see me—let me go and find him!” It was as if this Jeffries struggled to break away there and then.

“ No, no—sit still—leave it to me, and keep your face before this weeping woman—I was born where they understand these things!”

And after a hellish minute—the voice of that one prevailed.

I turned to Kitty.

“ Good gracious!” I remember I said, with an air almost of amused incredulity. “ Why, who on earth told you that ridiculous tale?”

The one who came from the place where they understand these things was right. Kitty looked up. At first she seemed unable to believe her ears—unable to believe that I could treat the monstrous thing with amused disdain. Then, as she slowly realised, her face shone. She gave a quick glad cry.

“ Jeff!”

“ What, dear?” I said, smiling.

She choked. “ Oh . . . my good, big man!”

(“ Laugh now,” the wicked one prompted; and I laughed.)

“ Good heavens, what a tale! . . . Who told you? Archie? Just you see if I don’t tweak that young man’s ears!”

In her infinite relief the poor woman broke down utterly. She shook with the mingled gratitude and humiliation of my pardon.

"Louie Causton!" I scoffed. "You actually asked her that? Why, how she must have laughed!"

"Oh—you're wonderful, Jeff!" Kitty adored me.

"Oh," I replied, quickly recollecting myself, "don't think I'm not angry! I'll give that young man a jacket-dusting! He shall have a wedding present from me he'll remember, I promise you! Why, of all the mean tricks! . . ."

I went on. Presently Kitty had found me so wonderful that once more she could even toy a little with a peril.

"Louie wouldn't tell me . . . who . . . she said she'd die first . . ." she half sobbed by-and-by.

I looked into her little puffed eyes. "Then," I said, smiling, "you've only the word of a not very trustworthy woman for it that after all . . . eh?"

A saint could hardly have cheapened the worshipping look she gave me.

"So," I resumed presently, "that was what ailed you all last night, when I was thinking all the time it was my uniform?"

"Yes—I tried hard to tell you, Jeff——"

"And does Archie really believe this tale him-

self, or is it just one of his little pleasantries?"

She didn't know.

"Is he at the college this morning?"

"Yes."

"Good. Will you send him down to me if I walk back with you? I think we won't lose any time over this."

"And you'll give him a really severe talking-to?" she asked eagerly.

"I will," I promised. "Come——"

Twenty minutes later I was again in the doorway of the Business College, waiting for Archie to descend.

And as I waited I reflected how well-nigh irrevocably I had tied myself up with Kitty now. I think that up to then she would have stuck to me even had this of Miss Causton been true; but now she would never, never let me go. Perhaps I may here mention the plan I had at first had for getting rid of her when I should require her no longer. I had based that plan on the fascination the "compromising situation" of her favourite novels always had for her. I never knew anyone so self-conscious about her defencelessness, and I had worked it out that I had only to propose my own chamber for an assignation and she would conceive herself to be looking into the bright face of danger indeed. All peril and all romance would lie for her in her setting foot on the

lowest of my stairs. . . . And doubtless one glance at that naked room of mine (I had pawned even my oil-stove) would, I had estimated, drive her away in instant and horrified fright. . . . I had not been above planning this.

But now she would never, never leave her big, wonderful man.

Yes. I had fettered myself fairly completely.

Holborn was noisy that morning, and between the sound of passing vehicles and Archie's own light tread I was not aware of his presence until he spoke. Instantly I saw that he thought he knew why I had come and had resolved to take one bull at least by the horns.

"I say, Jeff," he began at once, with embarrassed sincerity—a sincere desire, that is, to be out of the mess he had landed himself in, "Kitty's just told me. I know—I know you must be beastly angry with me—quite right too—I'm awfully sorry and—and ashamed. It was caddish. But I really didn't mean anything, and—and—and I thought you as much as said it yourself, you know——"

I judged it best not to speak just yet. I stood looking at him.

"You're an awfully good sort," he went on, conciliatingly, "but—but—I really thought you *were* a bit sweet on her (that was all I meant)—that time—you know—before I knew it was really Kitty. I

simply said to Mackie—he watched you too at the party—I admit I was ‘on’ a bit, and never thought it would end like this——”

Then I spoke. “You mean you didn’t think it would end in my getting the sack and being cut by everybody I know except yourself and Mackie? How did you think it would end, then?”

He jumped eagerly at a chance, ready to promise anything.

“I’ll see that’s all right, old boy—and Hitchcock *was* coming back anyway, you know—you only had the job while he was away——”

“Oh!” I said, with a nasty laugh. “And in your opinion that’s all? . . . What about my character?” I demanded suddenly. “Eh?”

“I know,” he said, with hanging head. “It was rotten of me—but I was ‘on’—I really was. And your character’s all right, Jeff, with anybody who knows you—they know what a first-rate sort you are——”

“Thank you,” I said stiffly. “And what about—the partner in my guilt?”

“Oh, *her!*” the little animal said, as if *she* could be left quite out of the question. Then apparently he felt the stirring of returning rectitude. “Well, Jeff, I have apologised. . . . I don’t see what more I can do, except of course to see you all right. . . .”

I noted the birth of the attitude I wished to create. I began to appear to let him down by gradual degrees.

Exactly how much of it was appearance you see. I abhorred the little wretch. And his renewed apologies, promises, explanations! . . . He had been "on" he had "simply said" to Mackie; I "should have lost my job soon in any case"; and "he'd see I was all right!" . . . That was all his sense of a hideous slander! And his almost rebellious "Well, I have apologised." Good heavens, he would be putting *me* in the wrong presently! . . . Every muscle in my body was straining to be at him.

But that, I knew, would never, never 'do.

Presently I turned once more to him. 'All this, after all, was not in the least what I had come to talk to him about. It was only a screen.

"Very well," I said at last. "What's done's done. We'll leave that for the present. Now there's something else I want to say to you. Do you know what it is?"

"How should I know?" he said, relieved that the subject was turned.

"Think . . ."

When Kitty had come down to see me an hour before she had done so in her hat and coat. She had had her confession to make, and had, I fancied,

done me even in her attire the courtesy of hinting humbly that she was entirely at my disposal. But Archie evidently thought that our difference could be arranged in a five minutes' talk sandwiched in between two lessons. He had not even put his hat on. He stood, a small fair figure, red-waistcoated, brass-buttoned, hands in his pockets, leaning against the name-board of the tenants of the various floors of the building, while I, with one hand against the board, hung over him like a huge angel of good and evil, bidding him think.

"Think," I said again.

He suddenly realised what I meant. I could no more hold his eyes than I could have held those of a chidden dog. They cringed, evaded, even dared short defiances.

"Think," I said once more.

All at once he said, "I don't know what you mean."

"Then," I said, "I shall have to tell you."

"So," I concluded some minutes later, "do you think you are—doing right—to marry?"

We still stood, he with his back to the name-board, I with my hand against it, almost enveloping him with my physical presence. And now, no detail of my arraignment spared, I had at last caught his eye.

Even before he spoke my heart gave a savage leap. Already his soft and spongy nature had begun to be hardened to that attitude I needed.

"Oh!" he said. . . . Then, proudly, "But this is interference."

"You think," I repeated slowly, "that you have the right to get married?"

His very admission was a defiance of me. "I know I've been rather a rotter," he blustered.

Once more I repeated monotonously:

"You still think, after what I've just said, that you have the right——"

"I think," he broke out, "that if you looked after your own girl and left me to look after mine it would be better. I'm frightfully sorry about the other thing, of course, but—dash it all!——"

Our long exchange of looks said the rest, and it was not my fault if he didn't understand what his refusal to heed me would involve. Some people never understand, and cry afterwards, "You never told me that!" as if one man had the right to demand of another that he should speak the uttermost word. I cannot see that there is any such right. For such as these there is no uttermost word. Elias and the Prophets cannot make them understand. Though one rose from the dead to tell them they would not believe. The God who made them as they are cannot make Himself known to them—He can only de-

stroy them again. They go out into the night in their ignorance, and for them there is no resurrection in knowledge. . . . Therefore if the uttermost word will not enlighten them, why speak it? Weakness lies in that word. Because it is weak. Art leaves it unspoken, and the Seer, having spoken it, comes down from Sinai no more. Only by a withholding from it does man achieve. Making three parts greater than the whole, he does not put forth to the last. He will not return bankrupt to heaven. The unuttered utterance is his credential, to be restored to the Bestower of it.

Therefore I did not, at that time, tell Archie Meridew that if he married I should slay him. But all, all else was in my eyes for his taking.

Then our gaze severed.

As I dropped my hand from the wall the devil frisked in me again. I had warned him, and had my own safety to consider now. Without attention to detail you can accomplish nothing in this world, and a thing is bunglingly done when you yourself suffer the consequences of it. Whatever I might do, I intended to suffer no consequences.

"Well, Archie," I said, as a man speaks who washes his hands of something, "I've told you what I think about it. There's no doubt it is, as you say, an interference, but I think it's justified, and so I'll say no more. . . . And now, about that other:

I need hardly say that I expect you to make things all right for me again."

"I will—I really will, Jeff," he promised at once.

"You see," I amplified, while the devil in me frisked, "leaving my reputation out of the question, it's beastly inconvenient. For instance, I'm badly in need of some shorthand practice, and I certainly don't intend to go up these stairs again until I'm rehabilitated."

He leaped at the chance of a reparation that would cost him little. "Oh, that's easy," he said. "Of course your own place—I mean, why not use mine, as you used to?"

"Oh," I objected, "I can't very well use your place when you're not there."

"I'm going to be there most of the time now," he replied. "Perhaps you think I'm off on the skite again, but I'm not." ("The Devil was sick," thought I again.) "I'm dead off all that now—straight. I do wish you'd come!"

"But," I said (while that imp in me positively capered), "you'll be awfully busy—with other things. I hear you're to be married at once——"

"Not too busy for that, old man," he assured me. "Do come!"

"Well, I'll see," I promised.

Half-an-hour later I was sitting in the British Museum reading-room with a stock of books on Medi-

cal Jurisprudence before me. Those two spirits within me were whispering again—plotting, machinating, discussing common ground of action. I had not yet resolved to take any action; but I had resolved, and firmly, that if action was to be taken I myself was not going to be caught unawares.

V

IT was true that Archie was busy. His "skite" had cost him a good deal of money, and he intended to make good some of the loss by economising on his marriage. With this end in view he had determined that his honeymoon and his summer holiday should be run into one, and had fixed, or Evie had fixed for him, a day towards the end of August for his wedding. He was going to Jersey, for the sake of the breath of the sea (I fancy that in this he was following Store Street advice); and he intended on his return to go into rooms until he should have had time to look round for a house.

His personal preparations were extensive. Ten porters and carmen a day called at the house near the Foundling Hospital, delivering purchases, and his upper floor was heaped up with bags, boxes, drawers taken from their cases and laid upon the floor, brown paper, cardboard boxes, new clothing. And one day—I won't set down the date—he lost his latchkey in the muddle. He did not know that he lost it as a result of my own close studies in the reading-room of the British Museum.

"Can't find the blessed thing anywhere!" he grum-

bled. "I took it off the bunch to slip into the pocket of my evening waistcoat—you can't carry a bunch of keys about in your evening clothes—and I can't think where the devil I put it! . . . Well, I shall have to ask Jane for another."

It was also a consequence of my deeply private studies that about the same time I had an accident with the hook of his bedroom door. The night being sultry, I had removed my coat, and hung it on his hook, over one of his, and, somehow, in going through the pockets of the undermost coat in search of the key, he had several times twisted the collar-tab by which my own garment hung. In taking my coat down again a little later I used some force; I used so much force that I fetched the whole hook down, leaving a small piece out of the wood of the door, and, Archie, busy emptying a drawer, remarked that to put it up again would be something for the next tenant to do.

"Oh no—better leave the place as you found it," I said. "You go on—I'll attend to it."

"Well, I don't know where you're going to find the screw-drivers—with my latchkey, I suppose," he remarked.

But I knew where the screw-driver was. I found it, and put the hook up securely again, a couple of inches below its old place.

I also carried constantly in my pocket, ready for

use at any moment, a written page of notepaper, the compilation of which had cost me a good deal of thought in the reading-room.

Yet I must make perfectly clear to you that these and twenty other things that had the appearance of preparations committed me to nothing. They were merely part of the prudent course of making ready, not for the best that might happen, but for the worst; and that the worst might be avoided I plotted at the same time with almost extravagant care. For all this last, however, the effective human mind works as it were in separate compartments of the job to be done, and there was no denying that this was or might become a job. I treated it as a job. And as a job it cost me no more qualms and tremors than the cool preparation for an examination in Method might have done. I did not turn pale when I read in a book of forensic medicine that when one man slays another he commonly uses far too much violence; I merely noted the fact, and reminded myself of it from time to time, to be perfect in my (I still hoped superfluous) lesson. I did not blench when I learned that, judicial executions apart, ninety-nine per cent. of hangings were suicidal, so that, certain other precautions being observed, a presumption could be made preponderatingly probable. I merely turned my attention to the qualifying precautions. And as for that sheet of paper I carried—well, young men have

killed themselves for less reason, and seldom for greater. Indeed, to die by his own hand might be the final virtuous act in which he took his farewell of the world. I would—still in the last event, you understand—allow him that empty semblance of virtue. Whether he needed it in heaven or not, I needed it on earth.

And (I am still talking purely hypothetically) I now recognise that I had prepared our respective mental attitudes with instinctive skill. That clever fiend within me had seen to that before I had become awake to that fiend's existence. By about the—till say a fortnight before the day fixed for his wedding—none could have told that I had the shadow of a grudge against him. He had made, for his slander of myself, a sort of semi-public apology—that is to say, he had mumbled a few words in the presence of Weston and the Principal of the College; but by that time the question of slander had been already so far from me that I had hardly had to affect an equanimity of manner. Without any effort whatever I had hit the necessary degree of magnanimity to a nicety, and there had been an end of that. I was free to return to the college again. This now mattered little since we were within a few days of the end of the summer term, and it was proposed to have, not a breaking-up party on the premises, but a boating-picnic at Richmond.

That I was in love with Evie Soames none knew. Did they? Could they? She was engaged to Archie, I to Kitty Windus; but I examined it again, to make sure. . . . No, no suspicion of jealousy could attach to me; none would think of a *crime passionel*. . . . And was it jealousy? Was it a *crime passionel*? I do not think you can say it was. True, I intended in the teeth of all the world to marry Evie Soames, just as I intended one day to be rich and to make my inherent power felt; but there would have been other ways than murder of accomplishing that. I should have found a way. . . . No; he had the best reason in the world for what I was so carefully planning for him. To me none whatever could be attributed. My preparations (for the worst, of course) would be complete when I had made use of that paper I carried in my pocket.

It was one evening less than a week before the day of his wedding that I chose for the completion of these preparations, and I had walked with him as far as his home. There, with a good-night, I was artfully passing on when he himself detained me.

“Aren't you coming up for a bit?” he said. He had been monstrously hospitable since I had taken him to task about the slander. I had reckoned on this.

"No," I replied, "I must get some shorthand practice—I'm off home."

"Oh, come in," he urged, taking my arm. "I sha'n't get much either this few weeks—come in, and we'll have an hour together at speed. Come on—I've got some books you may as well have—I sha'n't want two sets."

He meant he wouldn't want Evie's text-books as well as his own. I had not been able to afford books for my studies, and so had had to make use of those belonging to the college. This was the nearest he had come since my accusation to speaking about Evie and himself together.

I went up to his rooms for a speed practice in Pitman's Shorthand.

"Here are the books," he said, when he got in. "Better put 'em where you'll have your hand on 'em—once you lose sight of a thing in this mess you can say good-bye to it. That blessed latchkey of mine hasn't turned up yet. Well, shall we get work over first and then talk a bit?"

He swept aside with his arm a heap of new shirts and collars and tissue-paper, took a writing-pad from the drawer of his table, and then looked round for something from which to read aloud. I produced from my pocket a newspaper, which I tossed over to him. I also had cleared a portion of the table for

myself and was sharpening a pencil. My pad lay before me. He was taking his watch from the guard.

"Do I read first?" he asked, opening the newspaper. "Right-oh. Say when you're ready."

I drew up my chair. "Right," I said.

And in his rapid, clear, high-pitched voice he began to read.

It was the speech of some politician or other he read, and my pencil flew over the paper, swiftly taking down. Page after page I wrote, and I had almost forgotten that I was engaged on anything more than an ordinary exercise when suddenly he called "Time!" I stopped, and took a long breath.

"Now transcribe," he said. "You'll find paper under those gloves."

"No," I said. "You take down now. Saves time. Transcribing's the slow part, and we can both be doing that together."

"All right," he said, passing over the paper and making ready.

"Right? Go," I said.

And I began in my turn to read.

He had given me a continuous speech, but I gave him the Police Column. "Big Blaze in Bermondsey: Suspected Arson," I gave him. ("That chap'll get a couple of years for that," he interdicted). And then I passed to "Alleged Bucket-shop Frauds." I

had already got my paper from my breast-pocket, that paper I had compiled in the reading-room of the British Museum. . . .

“—bail being granted in two sums of £500,” I concluded the bucket-shop paragraph and went on without pause:—

“PATHETIC CONFESSION

“At Marlborough Street yesterday Rose Baxter, 24, seamstress, living in Osnaburgh Street, was charged before Mr Siddeley with a determined attempt to commit suicide by hanging herself in a shed adjoining her dwelling, the property of Messrs Wright, Knapton & Co. The beginning of the case was reported in *The Argus* of 24th June. Inspector Woodhead read aloud a letter purporting to be in the prisoner’s handwriting, from which we take the following.”

(“Cheerful subjects you choose, I must say,” commented Archie, *sotto voce*.)

“Dearest mother, I cannot face the disgrace. I hope you will forgive me for the trouble I am bringing on you. I have put it off as long as possible, hoping things would get better, but there is only one end to it.”

(“Kid, eh?” murmured Archie, writing.)

“I trust God will forgive me. I am not afraid to die, I am afraid to live and face it. I cannot do E. this wrong. Please, dear mother, think of me as I used to be. I have tried and tried, but it is all no good, and I am better out of the world. Give my love to everybody, and try, dear mother, to forgive me.”

“Time!”

Archie leaned back in his chair.

“Phew! Was that five minutes? Seemed short,” he said. “Just a breather before we transcribe.” He lighted a cigarette. “I say, Jeff: do you know any dealer who gives a decent price for second-hand clothes? I’ve heaps here I sha’n’t want any more.”

I had small use for such a dealer. “You might try Lamb’s Conduit Street,” I said. “I’ve bought clothes there.”

“Silly ass—— I didn’t mean that!” He was now monstrously careful of my feelings.

“Say when you’re ready to transcribe,” I said, pushing across a wad of paper.

“All right, let’s get it over. I’ll race you! Ready?”

We plunged into our longhand transcription.

" Ah! " I said, twenty minutes later. " Beat you, Archie! "

He was racing through his last paragraph. " Not by much, you haven't, " he said, and then, following our practice with exercises at the college, " No you haven't—you haven't signed—hooray! " he cried, dashing in his signature and looking at his watch. " Thirty-two minutes—pretty smart, what? "

An hour later I left, with his exercise as well as my own slipped between the leaves of Smillie's " Balance of Trade "—one of the text-books he had given me.

My hypothetical case was now completely prepared.

And now I spared no effort to save him. When it is yours to slay or to spare, you have in a sense slain even in sparing, for a life has been yours, even as Archie Merridew's life lay in the folds of that signed sheet of paper.

I carried that signed paper in my breast pocket on the day of the breaking-up party to Richmond. It had not been my intention to go to this picnic, for the sufficient reason that I was penniless *pas le sou*—but once more Kitty, to whom I had told some tale or other about pressing work, had broken out upon me.

"Oh yes—of course—I might have known!" she had cried, doubtless knowing that "pressure of work" tale of old from Frank and Alf. "Oh yes—it was quite enough that I should set my heart on it and I might have known you'd be busy or something! Busy!"

Her scornful little laugh had set me tingling: I—busy! But I had already seen that I should have to go. It had only remained for me to climb down to the level of Frank and Alf in the easiest possible way.

"Don't carry on like that, Kitty," I had said shortly. "It isn't so much the work; the fact is I'd like to go; but I can't very well ask them to pay me for the work before it's done, and the fact is I've rather miscalculated this week. It will be all right next week, of course."

"Oh, if that's it," she had said, her hand going as naturally to her pocket as if she had inherited the gesture as she had inherited her features or her name.

So I had accepted her purse, having accepted only meals before, and Alf and Frank and I were of a marrow.

The paper was in my breast pocket as we walked down to the stages to hire our boats. We were a largish party, but except for those in the boat in which I presently found myself—Evie, Kitty and

Archie Merridew—I have no very clear recollection of who was there. I took one oar, Evie the other, Archie was not exercising himself physically; and he lay back in the steering seat with Kitty. It was hot; I should have liked to remove my coat; but I dreaded to part myself even by a yard from that paper. As it was my movements caused it to work up a little in my inside pocket; I saw a corner of it at the opening of the coat; it had the appearance of wishing to take a peep at Archie; and by-and-by Archie asked me why I didn't take my coat off.

“Not clean shirt day, eh, Jeff?” he laughed, with the recollection of numerous brown-paper parcels in his eyes.

He himself was taking extreme care of a pair of spotless flannels, and at one stage of the afternoon, I forget when, that suddenly struck me as almost funny enough to shriek aloud at—his care for his flannel bags and carelessness about everything else. It struck me as—I use the words quite literally—devilishly funny. It fascinated me, so that I could not keep from watching him. My eyes wandered from time to time to the other boats of our party and of other parties, moving on the shining river, but they always returned in less than a minute to him, irresistibly drawn. This *galgenhumor* almost mastered me as the paper again crept up to take another peep at him as he lolled, this time with Evie

by his side, for Kitty had taken the other oar. It needed so little, so little imagination to look forward and see, strung out into the future, the results of that irrefutable Evidence in my pocket—the inquest at which I should not even be called as a witness—the funeral I need attend only as a mourner—the shock—the hushing up—and the certainty of everybody that they knew all about it! It was all horribly, horribly perfect. . . .

A picnic? Oh yes, this was a picnic. . . .

“Do take your coat off, Jeff—you’ll be so much more comfortable—why, you’re streaming!” This came from Kitty, who had the air of publicly possessing me, though only partly by reason of having paid for me, I think.

“Oh, I’m quite all right—really quite comfortable,” I replied.

And then I thought of Evie, and that horrible humour rolled away from me. Evie. What about her? She spoke even then.

“Jeff’s doing *all* the work,” she said. “I’m sure Kitty and I could manage the boat quite well.”

“Better stay as we are,” I replied. “Archie and I wouldn’t trim.”

Yes, what about Evie?

Well, for her it was only a choice of sacrifices. The choice was not of my determining; I put that responsibility on him. There was still time; I

would save him if I could; that was settled; but further than that I would not go. Should she fail to survive the shock it would be he, not I who had killed her. Better that, however. . . .

If you can see what else I could have done, tell me. I am willing to learn.

And so we went up the river, and drew in under a bank for tea, and then went ashore for a walk, I with Kitty, he with Evie, and so back to the boat again. I do not remember quite how the time went. I know that the sun went down in a flush of rose, and that Japanese lanterns appeared on the water and in the water in long smooth reflections, and that parties were singing and playing banjos in the twilight. I could not have sat by Evie—it really would have put the boat out of trim—and so I had not to sit by Kitty either. She and I pulled again; Archie and Evie in the stern seat were hardly distinguishable; and Archie, who had been singing, was quiet again.

And I must have succeeded in keeping that dreadful mirth of mine to myself, for Kitty had noticed nothing. She stood by my side in the crowded station afterwards, murmuring to me how lovely it had been.

That is all I remember about that picnic.

Nor have I any reason for not telling you the truth about this. I am concealing neither the man

nor the devil in me. For many years I have been almost entirely untroubled by it all, and I make even this slight qualification only because during the last month I have had feelings, not of remorse, but of something that is better described as a sort of backward curiosity. Perhaps it is a little more even than that, for a certain measure of admiration is not entirely absent from it. Don't misunderstand me, however. That tincture of admiration is not so strong that I cannot rest unless somebody admires my cleverness with me. Nothing irresistibly urges me to give myself away. But I have felt a little that backward pull of a man's own acts. I do not know, though practically it has not come near me, why men revisit places. I do not revisit that house near the Foundling Hospital—yet I do write this shorthand carefully locking my door before I begin and committing it to the most private recess of my cabinet as I complete each instalment. . . . Yet other compunction, if this be compunction, have I none. I am rich, I am serving my age by a more arduous grappling with its economic problems than any of my contemporaries, I could have had Pepper's knighthood had I wished for it, and I have been married this long time to Evie Soames. . . . No, on the whole I do not believe in melodramatic retributions. No shadowy shape of a fair-haired and red-waistcoated figure

glides at my elbow or steps with me into my brougham, and when I close my eyes at night I do not see as on a painted curtain that dimity-papered, lamp-lighted upper chamber of his. I do not start at sudden sounds, nor fear to be left alone in my library when it grows late. I play with my clean-born children. Evie is happy with me. And I even have Miss Angela in a cleft stick—for, when things go well, she is my gentle and much-loved maiden aunt by marriage, but when they go across she is my mother-in-law, who would stare incredulously at any who might hint that my brain could plot a horror and my two hands execute it.

And yet I write this, and sometimes waste an hour in wondering why, all of a sudden, Kitty Windus threw me over without giving a reason, and, when I went for one, had left her rooms in Percy Street and gone goodness knows where.

But bah! They are wrong who say that for every crime somebody has to pay. They speak from hearsay. I do not speak from hearsay. To my own knowledge one crime has been committed for which nobody has paid and nobody ever will.

Well, things are as they are . . . and so I will make an end.

My desperate struggles to save Archie Merridew included an interview that I had positively to force from Miss Angela. I had to force it for the rea-

son that, though I was now theoretically exculpated from the charge under which I had lain, slander always sticks, and some of it still stuck with Miss Soames in spite of her efforts to forget it. That, I think, was the reason why she saw me in the dining-room at Woburn Place instead of in her own sitting-room, where, I knew, Evie was. There, among the empty chairs, toying with Mr. Shoto's napkin-ring and putting it down again as I remembered whose it was, and then unconsciously taking it up again, I told her in such terms as I could find how matters stood. She nodded from time to time.

Again it was not my fault if she failed to understand. She did, I now know, fail, and failed the more hopelessly that she thought she did understand. Many, many thick wrappings lie between placid Aunt Angela and the stark realities of Life.

"I see perfectly," she said, when I had made that statement that would have appalled any but herself. "It was exactly the same with George. (I was once—engaged—to a man called George.) George put a precisely similar case quite plainly before me. *He* was consumptive, or rather his poor father was, and they do say it skips a generation—poor George!"

I shook my head, but she only sighed with gentle content. She did not really miss George.

"But," she went on, while my eyes wandered to

the corner by the sideboard where Archie had had his conversation with Mr Shoto about the Yoshiwara, "I shouldn't have refused him for that. (I did refuse him, and I heard afterwards that for weeks he ate scarcely anything at all.) It was something quite different that came between us—I've never told even Evie what the real reason was."

I interrupted her. "Are you sure, Miss Soames, that you've quite understood my real reason?" (More plainly I dared not speak, lest later there should be a chink in my own armour.)

"Oh yes!" she purred lightly. "Old woman as I am, I *quite* understand! As you say . . . 'the children.' . . ." Then, forgetting her attitude for a moment, she became playfully roguish. "Of course, it isn't as if you weren't in love with Miss Windus, and so in a sense feel it more nearly. You know how *you* would feel about it. I only say this that you may see that I *quite* understand these things do make a difference—eh?"

"But when I solemnly assure you that that has nothing whatever to do with it."

She adjusted the Indian shawl coquettishly about her shoulders.

"Ah, that's what you think! Come, Mr Jeffries you're positively ungallant! As if I was so old that I'd forgotten! And not only George either! I hope you won't be offended, Mr Jeffries, if I tell

you that I suspect—I suspect—that in this I know you better than you know yourself!”

Against that phrase there is no argument. Some people do not and cannot see. And again I did not think Miss Angela had the right to extract from me the uttermost word. I was aware that the very possession of that awful weapon of mine was dangerous; merely to have it might be to use it; but the question is one of your resolve, and I was fully resolved. My job had to be done, or (as I still dared in certain moments to hope) not to be done; but if it was to be done, it was going to be done thoroughly. My neck was not going into a noose because of other people's blindness. It was of no use talking to Miss Angela.

And that being so, I abandoned my attempt with her. I smiled.

“Well, perhaps you're right,” I said. “When one is in love oneself, and looking forward—well, perhaps it does bring it home to one. Perhaps it makes one a little of a busybody. So,” I concluded, “I hope you won't exaggerate what I've been saying.”

And a few minutes' further talk of things she had actually seen for herself in Archie—such things as his slight intemperance on the night of the birthday-party—made me quite safe with Miss Angela also.

To Kitty I was able to say even less than this. Indeed, she now detested Archie so thoroughly that I was scarcely able to say anything at all. And, looking back with all the care I am master of, I cannot see that anything I did say could have been the cause of that extraordinary breaking off with me without a word.

To Evie I said nothing at all.

There remained one more attempt with himself.

The time I chose for this was fixed by the exigencies of all the circumstances. I would have wrestled with him for the whole of the two days that remained before his wedding, but his own absence for a day precluded this. And as during that day I sought him in vain, I thought, very wearily, that he must now take his chance. Therefore, when it came to the very last day, the day before his wedding, I recognised that that also gave a perfect touch to the Evidence. The *very* eve of his wedding.

Several evenings before would somehow have been less plausible.

As I walked to his rooms that night I carried with me three things. Under my arm was my old brown-paper parcel—for to make a final use of his bath had seemed to me the most natural excuse for my calling on him. In my breast pocket I carried that piece of paper that was to be the Evidence

to the world. And in another pocket I had his latch-key, for which I foresaw a use later in the evening.

I knocked at his door a little after eight, and Jane admitted me. She gave a familiar look at the parcel that contained my shirt, and also said something about a box Mr Merridew was leaving behind for the care of which he wanted me to be responsible. I passed this box on the first landing. It was locked, but only half addressed—Archie had not yet secured the rooms to which he would return with Evie. But he had not yet said anything about the box to me.

I found him walking about his rooms, taking last peeps into empty drawers to see whether there was anything he had forgotten. His packing was finished, and he kept stopping in his prowls to throw another handful of old letters on to the smouldering heap in his old Queen Anne teapot of a grate. A little pile of these condemned letters still remained by the side of his perforated brass fender.

“Hallo!” he cried as I entered. “Just give a squint round, will you, and tell me if there’s anything so big I can’t see it. And I say: I’ve left a box downstairs; I wonder if you’d look after it for me? I’ve told Jane.”

“Right!” I said. “Bath ready?”

“All ready. By Jove! how letters do accumu-

late! You go and scrub yourself, while I polish this lot off."

I went into his bathroom.

But I did not make use of his bath. Somehow I could not bring myself to it. I only wanted the bath to be known as my motive for calling. So I filled it, stood by it for a number of minutes, and then ran the water off again. I took the same brown-paper parcel with me into his sitting-room that I had brought out.

I did not stay long after that. I was coming back. At nine I rose.

"What, are you off?" he said. "I must say you take what you want and clear off pretty quick! Supper'll be up presently."

"A last stag-party?" I said. "I'm afraid you'll have to have it without me. I've got to get to Bedford yet. So," I added, "I shall have to wish you—you know—get it over now."

"Oh, don't put on so much blessed ceremony!" he said. "It isn't as if you weren't going to see me again!"

It wasn't.

"Oh, about that box," I said. "Better call Jane, and tell me in her presence."

"Well, if you *will* leave me to eat my last bachelor supper alone. But I should have had to clear out myself just after. Got to have a word

with Aunt Angela—she let's me call her that now.”

He moved towards the door.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“To call Jane,” he replied. “Bell's busted now—time I cleared out of here—whole place is coming to pieces. . . . Jane! Ja—ne!” he shouted down the well of the stairs.

Then as Jane didn't hear he descended to the floor below.

His old red woollen bell-rope lay in a heap on the floor. That also had happened as a result of my studies in the British Museum. I busied myself with it. . . . By the time he had returned I had made it quite ready and was gazing thoughtfully into his fireplace.

I went downstairs with Jane, who herself closed the door behind me. I gave her a very express good-night.

The remainder of that evening I can divide into four distinct stages, and I will adopt that course, taking them numerically.

The first stage was one of an almost overwhelming lassitude. I had an hour and a half and more to kill, and this lassitude came upon me suddenly as I walked slowly in the direction of Cheapside. I was in its power before I recognised its dangers. The man of action had suddenly sunk into abeyance

with me, and, now that all was ready, all interest in my job had departed from me. The drudgery of actual performance was all at once beyond my powers. I could have gone on planning—I wished there had been more to plan—but now to carry out. . . .

I collapsed suddenly.

Why (I asked myself wearily) trouble after all? Why trouble about anything? Life was short, yet already too long; its activities overlanded, its glories contemptibly little; why waste it in striving—nay, why live it all? Thirty years of it had brought me nothing; whatever another thirty years might bring me I should have to leave, and what would it matter after that whether I left much or little? Nay, were there really an Infinite Mercy to be “squared,” it was perhaps better to cast myself before it helpless, naked, and without profit of my life. Why not end it all now? Why not kill, not Archie, but myself?

I turned with bowed head down the Minories, and something within me—I think it was that honest and beaten and bloody-minded Jeffries—whispered “The River!”

Presently I stood not far from the Tower, looking over a parapet into the dark water.

Yes, the river would settle it, that was the real way out. No more Agency clerkships and red-and-

green-lighted apartments and sham betrothals on the other side of that parapet. And no more heart-rending strivings to be free of the circumstances into which the world malignantly thrust me back the moment I raised my head. Striving? I realised all my striving in the past—Rixon Tebb & Masters', the Method examination, my commissionaireship, the wanton slander, my late perfected plan—and the thought that the years to come might be but repetitions of all this hit me like a hammer. I could not face it.

Then a detached sentence from one of the books I had read in the museum sprang up in my mind, and I started a little. The sentence was to the effect that a man who leaps into water always removes his hat before doing so. I did not remember that I had taken my own hat off, but there it lay, on the parapet, at my elbow.

Then, "Well, it will do to cover some other poor devil's head," murmured that tired Jeffries, "Get it over, and send that conscienceless young scamp to hell with *your* blood on his head. Somebody always pays, you know."

I removed my coat.

But that tired Jeffries never spoke unanswered, and these words were answerable. To make a hole in the water from sheer weariness was one thing, but to destroy myself to compass another's damna-

tion was quite a different one. The other Jeffries spoke.

“Why should you kill yourself for his sin? Each man must bear his own. Nay, it is not committed yet and will not be if you are strong and play the man. Are you going to fold your hands and allow Evie . . .”

And at the thought of Evie I felt my sluggish blood creep again.

“You live in a practical world—be practical,” continued that satanic James Herbert. “Prevention is better than cure. Even could he be punished afterwards, how much better off would *she* be . . . *then?* What right have you to bring this horror on her? He’s selfish, ignorant, cruel—it would be dreadful at the best; but . . . oh, think, man! Think of her now . . . and tomorrow!”

“You only want her yourself,” growled the other.

“You do—but that’s not your motive!” cried the first. “You’ve overlooked all he’s done to you—but this isn’t to you! Coward—if you allow it! You won’t allow it—to kill him would be better than to allow it. . . . Come; what time is it? She’ll be preparing for bed by the time you get there.”

I put on my hat and coat again.

This was my first stage.

The second began with my approach to Woburn Place.

The sitting-room with the pink-shaded lamp lay at the front of the house, but Evie and her aunt slept at the back. The sitting-room was in darkness as I passed. I took a side street, and then a back cartway used by tradesmen. A high wall was in front of me, but by stepping back I could see the hinder part of the row—landing windows, bathroom windows, tiny conservatories, bedrooms—various oblongs at different levels, some blinded, some with lamps, many in darkness. Behind me was a mews, with horses that moved their feet in their litter and dragged at chains from time to time.

The tradesmen's entrances were unnumbered, and I do not know whether I hit on the right house; but that did not matter. I have mentioned my uncommon powers of mental visualisation, and these sufficed me. I fixed my eyes on a window; it might or might not have been Evie's; but to all intents and purposes it was. Somebody was retiring there, and the blind was lowered.

I saw no hand, no shadow on the blind. Only the light went out suddenly, and from the sound the blind made as it went up I judged it to be a spring blind. A piano had begun to play somewhere, but save for that all was silent.

It was the last of her single days.

To-morrow.

My heart was hideously alive again. What! Fold my hands—drown—and Evie as she still was up there.

Soft and terrible ejaculations began to break from my lips.

“Ah, would he? Would he? He would, would he?”

A clock struck half-past eleven.

This was my second stage.

I will begin the third at the moment when I pushed gently at the gate over the whitewashed area near the Foundling Hospital.

His light still showed over the leads, but the basement was in darkness. Evidently Jane had gone to bed. I felt in my pocket for his latchkey, mounted the three steps, and with infinite softness put the key into the lock and turned it. The door opened noiselessly, and I prevented the click as I closed it again by letting the little brass knob gently back with my thumb. Then silently I began to mount his stairs, passing on the way the locked box that had been put into my charge. I reached the top. The first sound I had made since entering the house was my tap at Archie's door.

“Come in!” his tenor voice called from behind the door.

I entered.

At first he did not seem more than ordinarily surprised to see me; it was only after a moment that the oddness struck him.

"Hallo!" he began, in natural though not altogether cordial tones. . . . Then, "Hallo! I thought you were in Bedford by this time."

"Missed my train," I said.

He stared mistrustfully. . . .

He had been preparing for bed. He had removed his collar and tie, and his red waistcoat was unbuttoned. Through the chink of his bedroom door I saw the light of his second lamp.

In his surprise at seeing me back again, he had half risen from his arm-chair. He remained, his hands on the arms of it, neither sitting nor standing, as he asked suddenly, "Who let you in?"

"Myself," I answered, in an even tone. "A little unceremonious, perhaps, but I knew Jane had gone to bed and didn't want to fetch you down. The fact is, I've found your latchkey."

"You've found my latchkey!"

"In my coat pocket. Don't ask me how it got there. Our two coats were hanging together one night, but even then I don't quite see. . . . Here it is anyway."

I put it on the table.

"That's a rum 'un," he said, slowly sitting down

in his chair again, but keeping his eyes on mine. "So you came back to give it me?"

"I came back to give it you. Besides," my eyes were on his slender bare neck, "since I was coming back—I thought I'd like another word with you before——" I paused.

For a moment I could not understand the readiness with which he took up the thing I had not said. His lips had compressed a little.

"Ah! Again?" he said, with a little kindling in his eyes.

"'Again'?" Then I saw. He had seen Miss Angela during the last hour, and she had doubtless spoken of my own call on her. "Yes, again," I answered.

That third stage had a curious close. That close was nothing less than the reunification of those two halves of the Giant to the fabulous splitting into two of whom I have likened my mental state. They came together again, these two halves, as the two forces come together that make the thunder clap . . . but of this in a moment.

After several moments of increasingly rapid talk, we were both standing, he defiantly with one hand on the edge of the mantelpiece, I at the other end of the hearth. He had risen a moment before at certain words of mine, as if to inform me that our interview was over. Once I had seen his eyes move

towards the place where the bell-rope should have been, but that lay, a red woollen heap, on the floor behind me, and he would have had to pass me in order to get into his bedroom. He had found an appearance of forcefulness in the use of violent words.

"Why, damn your impudence!" he blustered. "Look here, my good man! If you suppose I'm going to be talked to like this by you or anybody else——"

"Then deny the fact," I said for the fifth time.

"I'll not deny or anything else till I know what right——"

"I know it comes late, but I've spoken of it before."

"Yes—sneaking behind my back!" he said hotly, probably again remembering his recent conversation with Miss Angela.

"To your face."

"Yes—and if it hadn't been for something else I should have told you then what an interfering devil you were!"

"Merridew," I said slowly, "it's the last time."

He sneered.

"I'm glad of that—and confound you for a meddler!" he cried. "If that's all you came for, get out, and I'll get somebody else to look after my trunk!"

We were silent for a space, and in that space I heard the voice of that human Jeffries, almost pitifully seeking still to save him. "Give him every chance," sobbed that Jeffries, "he's only a weakling—you could crush him mentally as you could physically—it would be little better than infanticide—try him again—show him that red thing on the floor—and that carved thing on the door."

But now Archie in his turn seemed to have become divided. He had suddenly turned white. But an habitual pertness still persisted in his tongue. I don't think this had any relation whatever to the physical peril he seemed at last to have realised he was in. I stood over him huge and black as Fate. . . . "Spare him if you can," that generous bloodthirsty devil in me muttered quickly.

"Merridew," I said heavily, "you'll disappear to-morrow morning . . . or——"

"Shall I?" he bragged falteringly. . . .

"And you won't come back. I shall stay here to-night and put you into the train myself."

"Then you'll have to sleep in the bath—and you should know by this time how small that is," came from his lips.

And yet it came only from his lips. His terrified heart had no part in it. His only chance now was to have screamed aloud.

But he did not scream. Instead, he stooped

swiftly, caught up the poker, and struck at my head with it.

It was then that the thunder-clap came, and that I was James Herbert Jeffries, whole, and a murderer. Swiftly as Archie and I came together the halves of that Giant came together. Instinctively I had guarded my head, perhaps realising—I cannot say—that a single drop of blood might mean for me precisely what I intended to do to him; but it mattered little whether blood blinded my eyes or not. Another redness gorged me, and then, my mind became whitely blind. As colours are lost on a disc that revolves, so all my plans and preparations spun and mingled. All was there, yet nothing was there. For an instant my visual memories of that pleasant, dainty-papered apartment stood separate; my own old experiences and new divinations also stood separate; I saw ahead, three or four minutes ahead, his struggles in my great arms, my left arm about his ankles, my right hand over his mouth, the red of the woollen bell-rope against his white neck . . . and then all wheeled hideously together. . . .

I was upon him, smothering him with my bulk, and wondering even as I bore him backwards to the door whether I myself was bleeding. . . .

The fourth stage was characterised throughout

by an extraordinary quietness. There was the light sound of the turning of paper in it, for I had to search in a pile of old books and papers for his shorthand pad and to make sure I had the right one—I had to take from my breast pocket another sheet of paper and to glance at that also to make sure that it also was the right one—and then I had to approach the bedroom door and to drop this into his pocket. . . .

But before I did any of these things I tiptoed to the mirror over the mantelpiece in order to see whether I bled.

I did not. My left eye was of a dull red; but not with blood, and I could deal with that. As a preparation for dealing with it I emptied at a draught the brandy flask he had prepared for his journey on the morrow.

Softly as a cat I continued to move about.

Then I had to remember which of his stairs creaked to the tread. They were the fourth and the tenth from the first landing; I knew that as well as I knew my own name; and yet for a time I really could not remember the numbers.

The room was quiet as a grave as I gave a final glance round at the displayed Evidence. . . .

Then behind his Queen Anne grate a cricket began to sing.

Nobody saw me leave the house. I had to bring

his latchkey away. Without it the latch would have clicked as I closed the door from the outside.

Then I crossed Mecklenburgh Square and walked towards King's Cross.

A quarter of an hour later an apparently very drunken man of uncommon stature lurched heavily through the swing doors of my public-house and fell full length on the floor in the middle of a knot of drinkers. A barman dived quickly under the flap of the counter, with an "Outside!" rushed towards me. I was hauled to my feet. I had a hand over one eye.

"'E's copped the brewer all right!" a cheerful voice sounded in my ear. "Just smell 'im! Must ha' been drinking it straight out o' the cask."

"'Ere—'old 'ard—ain't it your lodger?" somebody else said suddenly.

"Is it? Lumme, so it is! Look at 'is eye!"

"Ain't 'alf a mouse!"

"'Ere, 'elp me up with 'im the back way, Jim—Lord! 'e weighs a ton! I've never known 'im 'ave a drink 'ere, but there, they get it at one place if they don't at another."

Then somebody bawled to me:

"Look out—don't blow your nose—you'll 'ave your eye up if you do!"

But I wanted my eye "up." Up it came instantly, large as an egg, and there was a laugh.

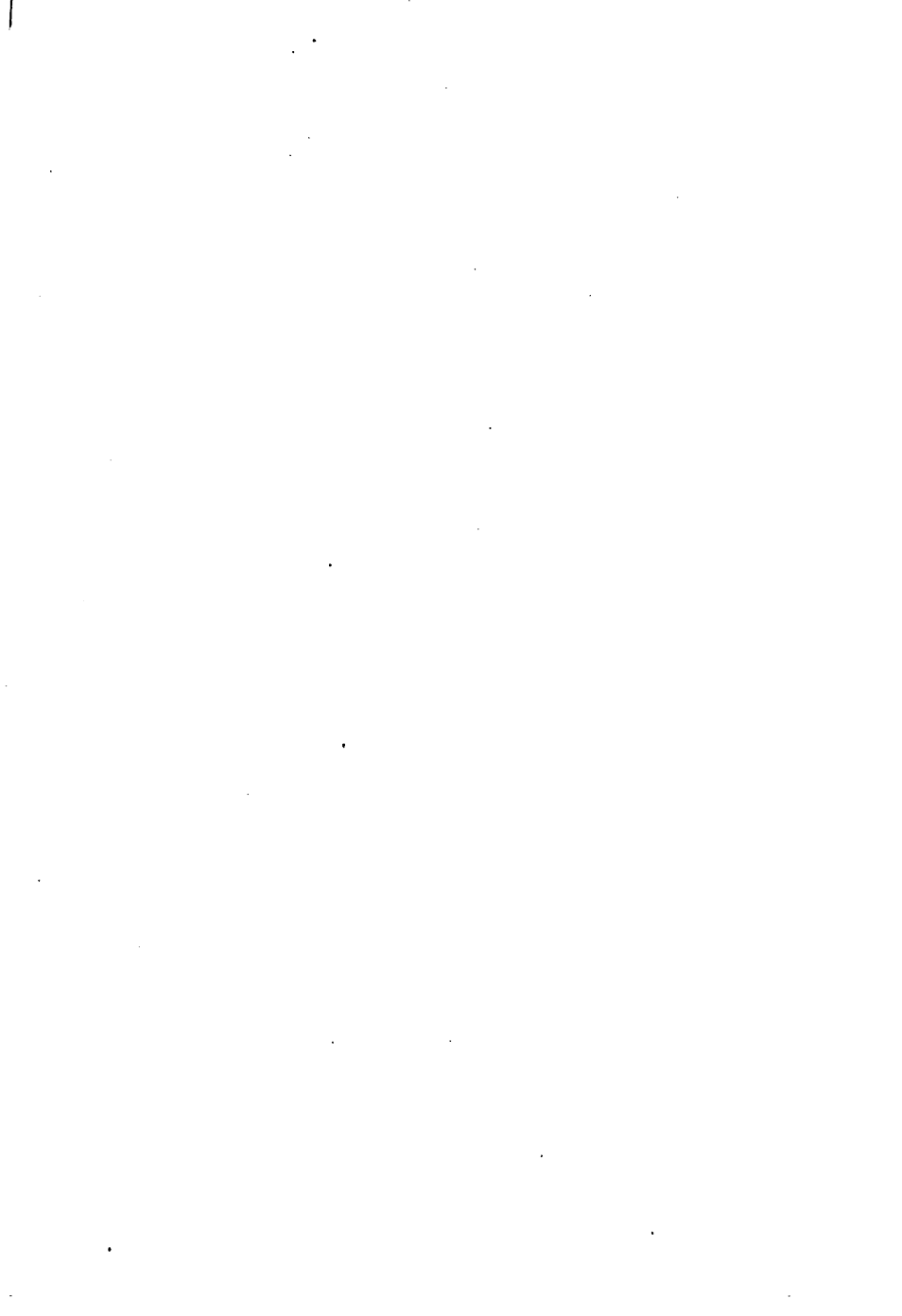
“Well, ’e won’t brag much about where ’e got *that!*” somebody said.

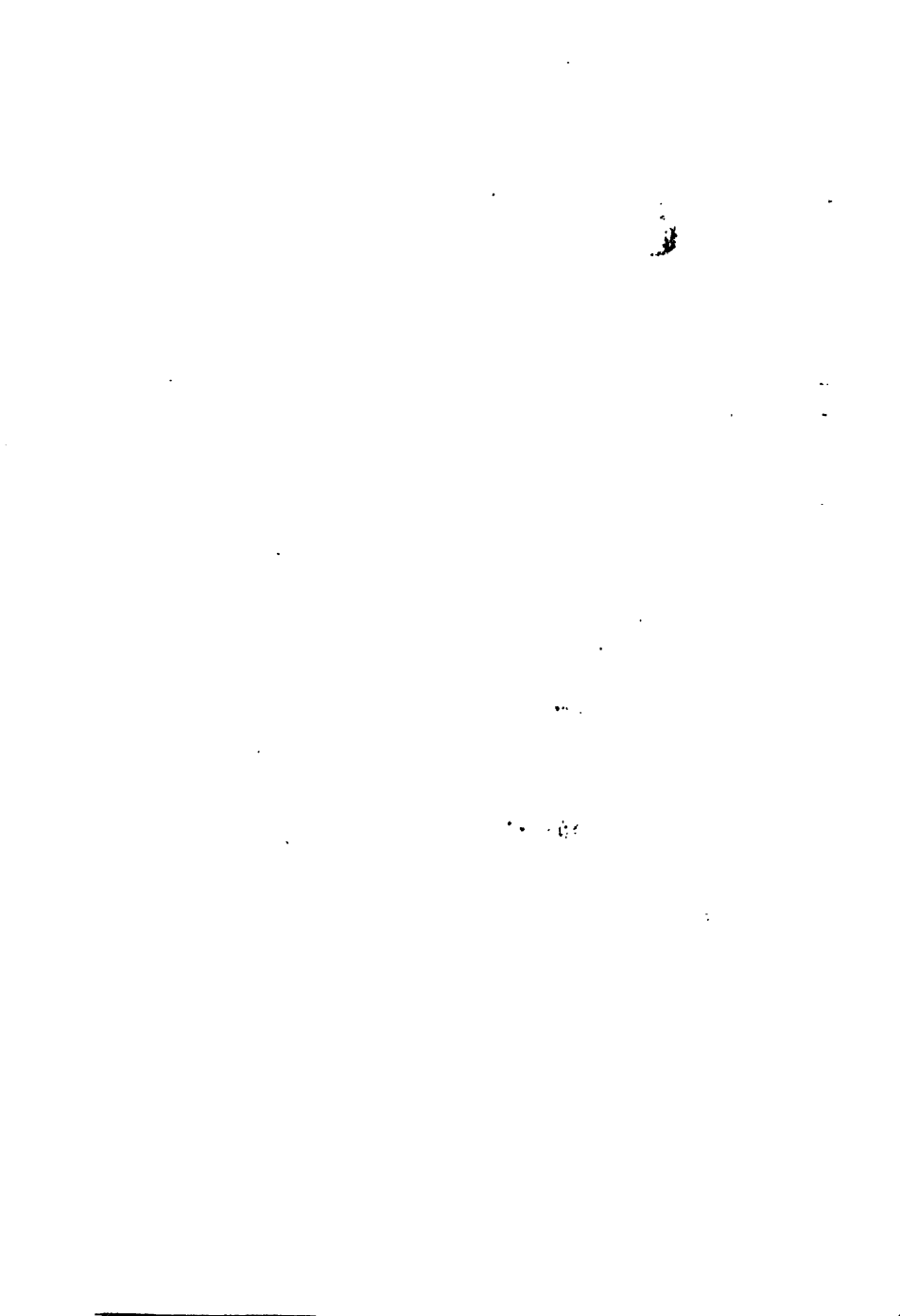
And they helped me up to my red-and-green-lighted room.

They say somebody always pays. Well, this my story. It is a long time ago, and nobody has paid yet. Nor, as far as I can see, is it likely that anybody ever will. There is only one detail that I have not been able properly to attend to, and even that has attended to itself—for of course Kitty Windus fled because she realised that I was in love with Evie. I could hardly expect her to stay after that.

No: nobody has paid. Nobody ever will.

THE END





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